

Umicore: International cooperation allows us to keep a step ahead of the pandemic

At the time when Covid was still being dismissed as just a mild flu in Belgium, large international companies were already taking drastic measures to protect their employees and ensure continuity of production. Dr. Bert Swennen, MD, Group Director Health & Safety at Umicore (worldwide) explains how international cooperation allowed Umicore to keep a step ahead of the pandemic.

Umicore counts as one of the essential companies and has around 11,000 employees worldwide in sites in Asia (including Korea, China), Europe (including Belgium, France, Germany, Denmark), North and South America (including Canada, USA, Brazil, Argentina) and South Africa. "Covid-19 was already high on our agenda in January 2020," says Dr. Swennen. "The pandemic first broke out in China and Korea, and as head of medical services, I was involved in measures being taken there to protect workers. It quickly became apparent that Covid-19 was more than just a seasonal flu and that the potential consequences could be serious."

Fast and decisive

Measures for individual and workplace hygiene were rapidly tightened up internationally in all Umicore plants. Social distancing, cafeteria planning, travel restrictions were introduced, the number of participants in meetings was limited, etc. Also, all travellers to Italy who had gone skiing during the February break were temporarily banned from the establishments. All of the measures taken by Umicore were aimed at keeping employees healthy and providing them with a safe and healthy workplace.

The fact that contamination could happen not only in the workplace but also outside of it prompted Umicore to have surgical face masks delivered to all employees' homes. "Our employees were also going shopping, taking the train, tram or bus, or going to places where social distancing was not possible. In order to protect them as best we could and due to a lack of surgical face masks in the mainstream market, we provided them with surgical face masks that we imported from China with the help of our colleagues," said Dr. Swennen.

Weekly meetings are held with the Executive Committee to review the Covid-19 situation in all regions worldwide and to evaluate the measures in force depending on the local situation. Given that the pandemic is raging at different levels in different regions, there is no "one size fits all". For example, the factories in Argentina and Brazil have had a longer lockdown than those in China.

China and Korea are managing to keep the infection under control, because the government is taking much more vigorous action. On the other hand, you see that in the US and Brazil the

government is having a much harder time getting a grip on the pandemic. But regardless of national policy, Umicore enforces its corporate policy, with the sole aim of keeping employees healthy and protecting them. That the policy has also worked is demonstrated by the fact that no production sites have been shut down due to a Covid-19 outbreak at the sites. If any sites have not been operating at cruising speed, this was because the supply chain was interrupted.

What now?

In the months of March and April, crisis management was relatively straightforward, says Dr. Swennen. The whole world went into lockdown, which would naturally cause the infection rate to drop. After that, the measures were relaxed and social life got back on track. This is, of course, necessary as such, but the question is whether the measures were not phased out too quickly? As a result, today we have a more complex situation that is much more difficult to manage. People are traveling again, going to restaurants, going shopping, seeing more people, the schools are open: so there are multiple factors that can influence the pandemic and, on top of that, there is the seasonal wave of upper respiratory infections that we see in the fall and winter, the symptomatology of which interferes with that of Covid-19.

From the perspective of occupational health care, under the current circumstances, the measures for occupational hygiene will remain in force: distance rules, strict hygiene in the workplace, limited number of people per meeting, options for working from home, travel restrictions, etc., with the aim of reducing the transmission risk within the organisation.





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Point of View

Article written by: Dr. Bert Swennen



Dr. Bert Swennen

Dr. Bert Swennen: In 1986, dr. Swennen started as an occupational physician at the Umicore Olen site (B). He was responsible for the health of employees in the cobalt and copper divisions. Besides his job as a physician in a large company, he also published studies on the health effects of occupational exposure to cobalt. In 2004, he was appointed as Group Director Health & Safety. In this position, he leads the occupational health departments and advises the company on relevant health aspects.

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