(We Want to Be) Healthy People

The first national report with "Healthy People" in its title [1] was published by the Surgeon General's Office in 1979. It opened with a cheerful declaration: "The health of the American people has never been better." The stated (and accurate) reason for optimism was the "remarkable reduction" in disease at that point in the 20th century.

With 97+ million individuals in the American workforce in 1979, the section on occupational safety and health (about 6 typed pages) mentioned "some" worksite programs for promoting health and the fact that "some companies have become concerned about stress in and out of the workplace..."

How times have changed: With approximately 140 million people employed, "Healthy People 2020" [2] describes the diversity of the workplace: "Workplace settings vary widely in size, sector, design, location, work processes, workplace culture, and resources. In addition, workers themselves are different in terms of age, gender, training, education, cultural background, health practices, and access to preventive health care."

The current report contains nearly 600 objectives; the ones related to occupational safety and health address work-related deaths, injuries, diseases, disabilities and violence. The gaps in our OSH knowledge have clearly changed as well. The 1979 report noted a general lack of data and inadequate understanding of "chemicals," while in 2020 we are concerned that we don't understand the effects of our exposure to nanoparticles, the ultrafine particles used in many industries.

The "Healthy People" reports are both an interesting snapshot of a society’s health goals and a map for their achievement.


UI HealthWorks is a member of the WORKSAFE IOWA Occupational Medicine Associate Network, the only university-affiliated network of occupational health providers. WORKSAFE IOWA is an outreach program of the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health in the College of Public Health at the University of Iowa (www.public-health.uiowa.edu/worksafe).