



At this year's AOHC in Denver, the Sappington Lecture will be given by former ACOEM President **Ron Loeppke, MD, MPH, FACOEM**.

Dr. Loeppke will speak on "Leveraging the Power of Prevention in the Global Quest for Better Health & Safety." We caught up with him recently to learn more about this topic.

Q: You have been researching, and writing about, the power of prevention strategies for many years. Why is this topic so important to you?

A: I learned early in my medical career that many of the conditions that ended up disabling or killing patients could have been avoided through relatively simple preventive interventions--and the more I saw the often-tragic results for people, the more convinced I became that we needed to move beyond our "sick" care system and develop more of a true "health" system. So, I did a Preventive Medicine Residency and Occupational Medicine Fellowship to build my medical practice on the pillars of prevention – providing health care and health promotion/health protection programs for workers and their families.

Q: Prevention is certainly important in medicine, but why do you feel it is particularly important for those who practice Occupational and Environmental Medicine?

A: Yes, prevention is important, and should be advanced by all clinicians. But in our specialty, we are in the unique position to not only provide health care and preventive medicine for individual patients, but also help manage the health of populations by providing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention services through workplace wellness, health and safety programs. We also recognize that chronic disease is rampant in the workforce and that the health of the worker impacts their work just as the work can impact their health—producing an inextricable link between the health of the workforce and the productivity of the workforce. Therefore, with every step toward prevention we take, we are advancing two goals: improving the quality of life for individuals, and at the same time tangibly impacting the economic vitality of nations. This ability to leverage our efforts for wider impact is what, I think, helps make OEM such a rewarding specialty.

Q: You mentioned the health and economic vitality of "nations," and your lecture title references a "global quest." Are we making progress in the effort to get people to focus on prevention in workplaces around the world?

A: We are making progress, but we need to increase our efforts. The good news is that the international OEM community is much more cohesive today than it has ever been. The International Occupational Medical Society Collaborative (IOMSC), which ACOEM launched in partnership with the UK's Society of Medicine in 2013, is thriving and has grown from 18 countries with their occupational medical societies represented when we started to more than 35 countries' OM societies participating in IOMSC today. At meetings of the IOMSC I am struck by the commonalities that all of us are finding with workplace health and safety issues, no matter where we are – the most striking of which is the global epidemic of non-communicable diseases, like diabetes, heart disease and cancer. We know in the United States that chronic disease accounts for 75 percent of U.S. health care costs, and it is much the same in virtually every corner of the world. And yet – and this statistic always amazes me – less than five cents of each dollar spent on health care in the United States is spent on prevention.

Q: Do you think the message about the power of prevention is getting through, here and abroad?

A: I'm optimistic that we are making progress, but again, there is much work to be done. ACOEM has done an excellent job in recent years in helping employers see the wisdom of implementing integrated health and safety in the workplace as a business strategy. Also, our colleagues in other nations are getting their governments to understand the incredible potential of workplace health strategies. Yet, I think that one of the most important factors in getting us further along in a worldwide effort for healthier and safer workplaces is going to be helping employees and their family members better understand the personal power of prevention in their lives—being able to add a greater quantity of years to their life, and moreover, a greater quality of life to their years. The potential impact from the power of prevention can be profound – reducing the burden of risk and illness in individuals and populations, improving the health and productivity of workforces, enhancing the vitality of national economies and ultimately, helping make the world a more peaceful place. That's what the "global quest" really comes down to, and it's worth our while to keep striving for it.