

OH SHE-OSHA: Considered to be the founder of occupational medicine, she was the first American physician, male or female, to specialize in the medical practice of occupational health, a specialization formed during her years living at Hull-House.

After graduating from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1893, Alice Hamilton served internships in Minneapolis and Boston, then a year of medical studies at universities in Munich and Leipzig where previously, women had been kept out. As the first female allowed in, Dr. Hamilton received permission to attend lectures only in bacteriology and pathology, and only if she would remain invisible to male students and professors.

Back in America, Dr. Hamilton accepted a pathology professorship at the Women's Medical College of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and moved into Hull-House, where she stayed for over twenty years. Living with like-minded women while interacting with the poor, shaped her and her work.

She noticed how immigrant workers severely infected or maimed at work, were routinely fired, forgotten, and new immigrants hired. As the industrial era developed, government, employers, and workers were unprepared for this new way of life. Regulatory health and safety conditions were not yet identified nor legislated until Dr. Hamilton entered the scene.

During the 1902 typhoid fever epidemic in Chicago, she accepted a position as a bacteriologist at Chicago's Memorial Institute for Infectious Diseases, where she discovered the corollary between sewage and flies in transmission of the disease. Scientifically, she linked many health disabilities to noxious chemical exposure and unsafe working conditions in factories.

As the first director of the Illinois Occupational Disease Commission established in 1910, she conducted a statewide survey in which she inspected over 300 industrial sites, and discovered over seventy industrial conditions that exposed workers to lead poisoning. Her report impelled the first Illinois law providing workplace health compensation. Extensive reforms followed.

After presenting her report at an international conference in Brussels, she received an offer to expand her research to a national level, from Charles O'Neill, Commissioner of Labor in the U.S. Department of Commerce. But he did not offer a salary nor a position. With few opportunities offered to women, she accepted and from 1911 until 1921 implemented innovative procedural changes in factories across the nation. In retrospect, she is considered the first OSHA volunteer inspector.

In 1919 Harvard Medical School offered an "assistant" professorship of industrial medicine to Dr. Hamilton, with provisions concerning her gender, not her abilities. She was not to use the Faculty club, was not offered football ticket access, and was not to march with male professors at commencements. She accepted work under gender-abusive working conditions knowing all her students would be men. Harvard Medical School did not admit students who were women, until 1945 (all colleges 1975).

At Harvard, she was able to continue her national industrial research and after six years, joined the faculty of Harvard's School of Public Health. She served on the League of Nations Health Committee between 1924-1930 and expanded her research internationally. In 1935 she retired from Harvard, worked as a consultant for the U.S.

Labor Department in its Division of Labor Standards and served as president of the National Consumers League 1944-1949.

Many, she said, viewed her concern for worker health and safety in industrial medicine as tainted with socialism or with “feminine” sentimentality for the poor. But her radical ideas for workplace reform, became the philosophy that governs occupational health and safety standards today. In 1970, the Occupational Safety and Health Act was signed into law by then-president Richard M. Nixon, three months after her death at age 101.

Hamilton received many awards, distinctions, and numerous honorary degrees for her work that saved thousands, if not millions, of lives. But her rank at Harvard remains, “Assistant” Professor Emeritus of Industrial Medicine. OH SHE, OSHA notwithstanding, was never granted a full professorship equal to her male colleagues, none of whom had ever been exposed to the occupational health hazard of gender restrictions as was (is) she, the first American physician to specialize in occupational health.

Sources: www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographies/hamilton-a.html
www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/osha.htm
www.cdc.gov/niosh/hamilton/hamhist.html
www.osha.gov/Publications/JSHQ/spring2002/hamilton.htm