SUMMARY

Construction has long been recognised as one of the most dangerous and hazardous industries in the world for workers. Construction ill health and accidents are often severe, leading to deaths and disabling injuries. However, the perception that ill health and accidents are part of the job hazards should not be accepted. Often the poor health and safety performance centres on the failure of management to take proactive and corrective actions to address the causes.

The number of incidents of ill health, accidents and fatalities in the Singapore construction industry has been on a rising trend for the past ten years from 1989 to 1998 despite efforts to improve the record. The average annual accident frequency rate from 1989 to 1998 was 3.04 number of accidents per one million man-hours worked. Every year one in 10,000 workers will be inflicted with noise induced deafness disease and two in 10,000 workers will be inflicted with dermatitis disease on construction worksites.

Construction ill health and accidents are "unproductive" as they inflict a great cost to the industry in the form of lost worker time, higher insurance coverage, increased medical expenses, lost management time and negative publicity. The industry players should understand that health and safety considerations affect the profitability as much as the time, cost and quality requirements of a project. The workmen's compensation policies can only provide coverage for the visible costs such as medical and disability benefits but not for the invisible costs such as loss of experienced workers, worker's time, training costs, productivity and worker morale.

Current efforts are inadequate as they place the onus in the effort to attain health and safety in construction on the "occupiers" of the site who are usually contractors, instead of considering all key parties, including clients and designers as having equal responsibility.
The adequacy of the existing measures has been questioned in the wake of a series of high profile accidents on construction worksites. This has forced the Singapore Ministry of Manpower to strengthen the laws with the following tougher measures:

- more deterrent sentences, including jail sentences, for anyone who commits unsafe acts, or fails to take precautionary measures to prevent accidents;
- limiting the employment of foreign unskilled workers;
- compulsory retraining for workers affected by worksites with Stop Work Orders; and
- ensuring that health and safety considerations are addressed early in a project by introducing a law called the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations (CDM) similar to the United Kingdom Health and Safety at Work Act's CDM Regulations 1995.

The introduction of the CDM Regulations will help ensure that health and safety risks are systematically addressed early from the design stage right to the construction completion by the key parties. Projects will henceforth be designed to be safe to build and free from ill health problems in the long term. Adopting the CDM Regulations will also lead to more buildable designs, lower maintenance and refurbishment costs, benefiting all parties involved with the construction industry.