



State Comptroller and Ombudsman  
Annual Report 70B | 2020

Israel Defence Forces

# **Occupational Health in the IDF**

Abstract



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## Abstract

### Background

The aim of the field of occupational health is to safeguard the wellbeing of people at their workplaces by preventing occupational hazards. IDF High Command Regulations on the subject of safety and hygiene state that “military activity will not be conducted until after consideration of the safety and hygiene aspects arising from it, and as mandated thereby”.

The IDF Surgeon General is the authority who provides professional guidance in the field of “preventive medicine - hygiene”. The functions of the Occupational Health Branch at the Medical Corps HQ include serving as the professional body in regard to prevention of illness resulting from exposure to hazardous materials in workplaces, tracking the execution of Surgeon General instructions on the subject and undertaking reviews of these matters.

### Key figures

4.3%

Share of all deaths in the world in 2017 attributed to occupational diseases<sup>1</sup>

Approx. 800

The number of people in Israel dying each year of occupational diseases

1,736

The number of people who contracted occupational diseases in Israel in 2017

79%

of combat servicemen who were referred to the IDF hearing and speech institute in 2017 did not use hearing protection or used earplugs incorrectly

100%

Increase in the number of servicemen with a hearing related medical fitness problem from the beginning of their service until the end of their service<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Diseases caused by significant chronic exposure to occupational risk factors.

<sup>2</sup> Findings of an analysis of records of 50,000 servicemen who served in the Field Artillery Corps and Armored Corps in 2005 - 2016 conducted by the Medical Corps HQ.

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## Audit Actions









From October 2018 to July 2019, the State Comptroller's Office conducted an audit of occupational health in the IDF. The audit included, inter alia, the following issues: the staff work and decision making process on forming the Occupational Health Administration in the IDF; implementing the administration's formation; review of the Medical Corps HQ in the field of occupational health; managing information and knowledge in the field; and the protection of hearing of IDF servicemen. The audit was conducted in the IDF and the Ministry of Defense.

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## The Situation Reflected in the Audit Findings



-  Lack of options in staff work - The staff work documents for setting up an occupational health apparatus in the IDF did not include an examination of various options for formalizing the field, which would include: a presentation of the advantages and disadvantages of each option, comparing them and examining their implications, relevant examples and explanation of reasons for the selected course of action.
-  Four staff positions out of seven approved for 2018 for establishing the IDF's Occupational Health Administration have not been filled yet - The Quartermaster General Branch GHQ has not filled the position of occupational health desk officer that was authorized for it; neither has the armed forces corps allocated or staffed this position. At the Medical Corps HQ, only three of these positions - out of the five authorized - have been filled.
-  There is only partial cooperation between the Medical Corps HQ's Occupational Health Administration and the Chief Safety Officer Headquarters and Army Safety and Quality Assurance Headquarters<sup>3</sup>.
-  The Medical Corps HQ does not conduct reviews to ensure implementation of the directives prohibiting the use of an installation, equipment or material that endangers human health. Also, the Occupational Health Branch does not conduct GHQ audits in the occupational health field.
-  An occupational health field information system has been developed only partially and it does not provide a satisfactory solution in the information management field. Also, the Medical Corps HQ does not have systematic activity for retention of knowledge existing in the IDF in the occupational health field or sharing it with all relevant entities in the IDF.
-  Surgeon General instructions related to hearing protection for servicemen are not strictly followed, particularly in army corps training exercises.

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<sup>3</sup> Safety and Quality Assurance Headquarters.



In 2017, the Occupational Health Administration was formed in the IDF, entrusted with mapping of risk factors that may impact the health of IDF servicemen and civilian staff in a range of military frameworks, preventing illness by prevention of risk factor exposure, and conducting risk assessments and risk abatement activities.

Formation of a GHQ situation report in the occupational health field - In September 2019, the Deputy Chief of General Staff instructed the IDF Comptroller to conduct an audit during the 2020 fiscal year of the occupational health field for the purpose of "providing a GHQ situation report".

The Disabled Veteran Rehabilitation Division of the Ministry of Defense, together with the IDF Medical Corps HQ, began examination of claims that were submitted to the Division for injuries (including hearing damage) in 2010 - 2015 in order to show an accurate picture of the situation and provide the IDF information that would allow it to initiate preventive solutions. The Disabled Veteran Rehabilitation Division intends to broaden its investigations into additional years and into claims submitted to the Division in regard to illnesses.

The IDF is preparing to conduct hearing screening tests<sup>4</sup> for defense service candidates, initially at the Be'er Sheva Recruiting Office.

## Main Audit Recommendations

- 💡 The IDF must staff its positions in the Occupational Health Administration and later examine whether the formation of the administration and staffing of the positions led to a reduction in gaps.
- 💡 The Medical Corps HQ must make sure that it possesses the ability and tools required for conducting systematic, periodical review regarding the implementation of the directives prohibiting the use of an installation, equipment or material that endangers human health.
- 💡 The army must deal with the issue of the lack of an occupational health field management system in the IDF and remove existing barriers. Also, the Surgeon General must initiate the formation of an information and knowledge-sharing mechanism in the occupational health field that will assist in education.
- 💡 The army, its corps and field units must act to implement all Surgeon General instructions on protecting servicemen from harmful noise, including with regard to instruction and practice of the correct use of hearing protection equipment. Also they must ensure that servicemen use only Medical Corps approved protective means.

<sup>4</sup> A screening test that a medic conducts for assessing hearing threshold by air conduction at certain frequencies.

## Summary

It is important, even essential, to safeguard the occupational health of IDF servicemen and civilian staff. Despite this, as of the end of the audit, not all mechanisms required for fully managing this field and ensuring its correct functioning had been completed.

The State Comptroller's Office commends the IDF for its efforts in discussing the findings of the draft of this audit report and ordering the correction of flaws back in September 2019 in a discussion held by the Deputy Chief of General Staff.

### Shortcomings that the IDF's Occupational Health Administration must address

