

World Knowledge Forum 2013

For a Better Work Environment All Around the World

International SOS CEO Arnaud Vaissié shared his views on the global practices in the area of protecting employees abroad in an increasingly globalized world, while also stressing the importance of cultural understanding to create a healthy international workforce at the World Knowledge Forum in Seoul on October 17, 2013.

To understand the driving force behind Mr. Vaissié's vision, one needs only to look at the organization's inception.

The importance of improving health care through preventative and proactive measures became clear to Mr. Vaissié when he looked at the situation in China and Vietnam. For expatriates traveling within these countries, international health care was nearly impossible, as local doctors were unwilling to tend to their injuries, and timely international care was not available. He quickly came up with a solution.

"Within four weeks of putting together doctors and engineers, we came up with a PMIU, a portable medical evacuation kit, which was able to transport patients and doctors for the first time. So creativity is the essence of our corporation," he explained.

Mr. Vaissié continued to emphasize the importance of this issue by explaining the consequences that poor health care has on other systems.

"With this new global environment, health and business have become very interconnected. We call it the butterfly effect. If you look at it, a farmer in southern China with a fever is going to have an impact on a German worker in Frankfurt. Within hours or days, something [that] happens on one side of the world impacts the other side of the world." He continued by referencing the SARS epidemic in Singapore, which wiped out 6,600 employees due to the impact it had on the local economy. He declared, "The real impact was an economic impact."

Mr. Vaissié continued by stating that an increase in mobility is another factor to be taken into account when thinking about the importance of international health care. He believes that its expansion also means the expansion of problems.

The first issue mentioned was an increase in the amount of accidents, and the effect this would have on a work force. According to Mr. Vaissié, some companies have gone so far as to prohibit their employees from riding motorcycles, even outside of work.

The second issue mentioned was the spreading of travel-related diseases.

"When one goes to a malaria-infested region, the incident rate grows exponentially with the length of the stay in that location. When people stay more than six months, the incident rate goes up by three," he stated.

The lecture ended with Mr. Vaissié retouching on the need for a healthy workforce. He also offered some insight on how companies can best prepare their employees for traveling safely.

"A healthy company--you don't just look at the figures...it starts with a prepared and healthy workforce," he said. He offered a series of preventative and proactive ways for companies to approach this as well.

"Good management through planning...good crisis management...is not done at the time of the crisis. The fundamental aspect of crisis management is planning...if you plan after the crisis, God help you," he advised before adding that this can be accomplished simply by educating employees about pertinent medical issues, such as what a country's medical practices are.

Mr. Vaissié talked about the importance of cultural understanding and his belief that we must be able to manage global diversity in the future. He concluded, "We go as global as we have to. We stay as local as we can...not losing your soul...we need to keep as much as we can, but at the same time, we need to adapt."