Qualitative and quantitative differences between common occupational health risk assessment models in typical industries

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Abstract: Objective: The differences in the methodologies of various occupational health risk assessment (OHRA) models have not been extensively reported. We aimed to understand the qualitative and quantitative differences between common OHRA models in typical industries. Methods: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Australian, Romanian, Singaporean, International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), and the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) models were evaluated, and a theoretical framework was established for a comparative study. Results: Qualitative comparisons showed that each OHRA model had its own strengths and limitations, and exhibited a diverse distribution at different levels for each evaluation indicator. The Singaporean, COSHH, and EPA models had a much higher comprehensive advantage than the other models for all indicators. Quantitative comparisons demonstrated that these three models also had a stronger ability to distinguish the difference in risk ratios between different industries. The Singaporean model had the strongest correlation with the other models. Conclusion: Each model possessed its own strengths and limitations depending on its unique methodological principles. Combining the EPA, Singaporean, and COSHH models might be advantageous for developing an OHRA strategy. More studies comparing multiple models in key industries are required.

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Key words: Comparative study, Methodology, Occupational health, Risk assessment

Introduction

Workers exposed to occupational hazards are at a greater risk of developing work-related diseases and injuries¹. Globally, there are 2.3 million deaths associated with work-related diseases every year² and in many countries the economic costs of these injuries and illnesses ranges from 1.8% to 6.0% of the gross domestic product³.

Occupational health risk assessment (OHRA) in the workplace is essential for implementing risk control for occupational activities and maintaining worker health⁴,⁵,⁶. Therefore, OHRA models have recently been developed by many industrialized countries and international organizations. A series of risk assessment guidelines have been established by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)⁷,⁸ and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)⁹,¹⁰,¹¹. Furthermore, Australia¹², Romania¹³, Singapore¹⁴,¹⁵, the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM)¹⁶, and the United Kingdom (UK)¹⁷,¹⁸ have all developed their own OHRA models. Generally, OHRA models are established based on four core steps: hazard identification, hazard characterization, exposure assessment, and risk characterization.

Currently, there is little guidance for choosing the most suitable model for a given application, which relies on the
experts’ individual judgment, and therefore may lead to very different results depending on the experience of the consulted experts. It is therefore desirable to strengthen and solidify the theoretical framework for assessing and minimizing occupational risks, which is dependent on understanding the similarities and differences in the methodologies of the different ORHA models. However, at present there is very little information on the quantitative or qualitative differences among the different ORHA methods. Zhou et al.18 systematically reviewed the ORHA models used by the EPA, Singapore, Australia, Romania, and the ICMM, as well as the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) model developed in the UK, and concluded that the scope and principles of these ORHA models are not exactly the same, and that each has its own strengths and limitations. Therefore, quantitative, semi-quantitative, and qualitative methods can be applied in combination when conducting ORHA. The International Chemical Control Toolkit (ICCT), based on the COSHH model, was recently tested in parallel with the Singaporean model to evaluate the utility of both models and to compare them based on their theoretical and empirical aspects, and found that the assessed risk levels were largely consistent between the two models19. Another study compared risk level assessments using the EPA, Singaporean, and Romanian models in many industries such as chemical engineering, electroplating, and furniture manufacturing.20,21 The authors found that although each model had advantages and disadvantages, the Singaporean model possessed certain advantages when evaluating sawdust exposure.

The majority of reported work-related diseases and accidents occur in developing countries.1,22-28,29 Although some progress has been made in this area, the qualitative and quantitative differences in ORHA methodologies are poorly understood. The purpose of this study was to qualitatively and quantitatively compare six common ORHA models (i.e. the EPA, Australian, Romanian, Singaporean, ICMM, and COSHH models) in three typical industries (wood furniture manufacturing, electroplating, and crane manufacturing) by establishing a theoretical framework for comparative study.

Materials and Methods

Description of Typical Industries and Enterprises

The wood furniture manufacturing, electroplating, and crane manufacturing industries were selected as the ideal sample industries for this study for the following reasons. First, the three industries are classified as having the “most severe” or “relatively severe” occupational health risks. According to the “Management catalogue of occupational hazard risk classification of construction projects” issued by the State Administration of Work Safety of China (2012 edition), the risk levels for the electroplating and crane manufacturing industries are classified as “most severe” and “relatively severe”, respectively. The wooden furniture manufacturing industry has been downgraded to “relatively severe” from the original “most severe” risk level based on recent changes in administrative rules and regulations. Qualified local institutes for occupational health and technical services were unable to detect the presence of benzene, which is the most toxic chemical used in typical wood furniture manufacturing processes (e.g. paint spraying, polishing, and packing). Second, these industries are dominated by small to medium enterprises (SMEs), which in China usually lack comprehensive occupational disease prevention and control measures because of the employer’s poor legal knowledge, leading to a high probability of occupational health hazards.

A total of nine SMEs in the Zhejiang province of East China were selected as the ideal sample factories (three enterprises per industry). These specific manufacturing enterprises were selected because they had many features typical of other SMEs in each industry, such as similar types of work, production processes, occupational hazards, and exposure levels, as well as inadequate control measures.29-31 Together, the nine factories had a total of 600 workers at various positions.

Identification of Risk Factors

Based on field investigations, air sampling, and laboratory tests, the hazardous occupational factors were identified in the three industries. Table 1 shows that each industry has its own characteristic processes and hazardous factors. The levels of risk factors from the majority of processes in the three industries were qualified using the Chinese standard requirements (Occupational Exposure Limits for Hazardous Agents in the workplace, GBZ 2-2007). Only the levels of sawdust, noise, hydrochloric acid, and toluene generated from certain processes were disqualified. Air sampling for chemical poisons and dust was performed according to the sampling standard in China described in “The sampling specification for hazardous substances monitoring in workplace air (GBZ 159-2004).” Laboratory tests for these chemicals were based on a series of standards (The determination of toxic substances in the workplace; GBZ/T 160-2004). Onsite measurement of noise was conducted according to the standard “The physical factor measurement in the workplace (GBZ/T 189.8-2007)”.

Methodology for ORHA Modeling

Based on a literature review, the EPA, Singaporean, Australian, Romanian, ICMM, and COSHH Essential models were identified as the six most common ORHA models. The detailed principles of these six models have been previously described in the literature.9,11-17,29 Briefly,
Table 1. Identification of the main risk factors in three typical industries

| Industries                  | Processes          | Hazardous Factors | Exposure levels (mg/m³ or dB (A)) | OELs (mg/m³ or dB (A)) | Results  |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| Wood furniture manufacturing| Preparation,       | Sawdust           | 8.9 (4.6 - 27.2)                  | 3                      | Disqualified |
|                             | splicing           | Noise             | 80.8 (78.3-82.5)                  | 85                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Formaldehyde      | 0.3 (0.09 - 0.36)                 | 0.5                    | Qualified  |
| Assembling                  |                    | Sawdust           | 1.9 (0.87 - 2.5)                  | 3                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Benzene           | < 6³                               | 6                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Toluene           | 4.5 (1.1 - 8.7)                   | 50                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Xylene            | 6.1 (1.5 - 11.7)                  | 50                     | Qualified  |
| Paint spraying              |                    | Benzene           | < 6³                               | 6                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Toluene           | 5.8 (1.5 - 11.3)                  | 50                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Xylene            | 16.1 (4.9 - 28.8)                 | 50                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Sawdust           | 2.3 (1.5 - 3.1)                   | 3                      | Qualified  |
| Polishing                   |                    | Sawdust           | 3.6 (1.5 - 8.6)                   | 3                      | Disqualified |
|                             |                    | Benzene           | < 6³                               | 6                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Toluene           | 3.8 (1.3 - 8.9)                   | 50                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Xylene            | 9.8 (3.6 - 20.3)                  | 50                     | Qualified  |
| Packing                     |                    | Formaldehyde      | 0.15 (0.09 - 0.24)                | 0.5                    | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Benzene           | < 6³                               | 6                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Toluene           | 6.7 (4.3 - 11.9)                  | 50                     | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Xylene            | 15.5 (13.9 - 25.4)                | 50                     | Qualified  |
| Electroplating              | Oil removing       | Sodium hydroxide  | 0.28 (0.21 - 1.50)                | 2                      | Qualified  |
|                             | Pickling           | Hydrochloric acid | 7.7 (3.5 - 7.8)                   | 7.5                    | Disqualified |
|                             | Copper plating     | Hydrogen cyanide  | 0.57 (0.32 - 0.82)                | 1.0                    | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Sulfuric acid     | 0.42 (0.30 - 0.52)                | 1.0                    | Qualified  |
| Chrome plating              |                     | Hexavalent chromium | 0.02 (0.01 - 0.03) | 0.05 | Qualified  |
| Crane manufacturing         | Welding            | Welding dust      | 1.2 (1.0 - 1.8)                   | 4                      | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Manganese         | 0.02 (0.01-0.03)                  | 0.15                   | Qualified  |
|                             |                    | Noise             | 85.9 (85.1-86.2)                  | 85                     | Disqualified |
| Polishing                   | Grinding wheel     | Grinding dust     | 2.5 (2.2 - 3.0)                   | 5                      | Qualified  |
|                             | grinding           | Noise             | 86.7 (86.1 - 87.5)                | 85                     | Disqualified |
| Paint spraying              | Benzene            | < 0.49³           | 6                                  | Qualified              |
|                             | Toluene            | 1.68 (0.49-2.52)  | 50                                 | Qualified              |
|                             | Xylene             | 2.91 (0.68 - 4.33)| 50                                 | Qualified              |
|                             | N-butyl alcohol    | < 0.47            | 100                                | Qualified              |
|                             | Noise              | 82.6 (81.4-83.4)  | 85                                 | Qualified              |
| Smelting                    | Sulfur dioxide     | 1.7 (1.6 - 1.9)   | 5                                  | Qualified              |
|                             | Slag ash           | 1.7 (1.5 - 2.1)   | 8                                  | Qualified              |
| Dip coating                 | Benzene            | < 0.49³           | 6                                  | Qualified              |
|                             | Toluene            | 68.01             | 50                                 | Disqualified           |
|                             | Xylene             | 37.15 (30.12-40.21)| 50                                 | Qualified              |

The sample size of each risk factor is 3.
The exposure level of chemical factor is expressed by mg/m³, and the exposure level of noise is expressed by dB (A).
OELs: Occupational Exposure Limits, obtained from the occupational health standards in China (Occupational Exposure Limits for Hazardous Agents in the workplace, GBZ 2-2007). OELs for dust and chemicals were expressed in PC-TWA (permissible concentration-time-weighted average); OELs for noise were expressed in L_{Aeq,8h}.

* The concentration of benzene was below the detection limit in the wood furniture manufacturing and crane manufacturing industries.
these principles are as follows.

1. The EPA model: The EPA inhalation risk assessment includes two components: carcinogenic and non-carcinogenic risk assessments. In this study, only the non-carcinogenic risk assessment was used.
   a. Estimating exposure concentrations (EC):
      \[ EC = \frac{CA \times ET \times EF \times ED}{AT} \]  
      (Equation 1)
   b. Non-carcinogenic risk assessment:
      \[ HQ = \frac{EC}{RfC} \]  
      (Equation 2)
   c. The HR is assigned based on the carcinogenicity classifications established by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). The ER is based on the ratio of the exposure level (E) and permissible exposure limit (PEL) or OEL.
   d. If the exposure concentration is not available, exposure indices (EIs) can be used to determine the ER, as shown in Equation 3:
      \[ ER = \left[ \left( \frac{EI}{E} \right)^{1/n} \right] \]  
      (Equation 4)
   e. The theoretical framework for a comparative study of the different OHRA models consisted of two parts: a qualitative and a quantitative comparison.

Qualitative Comparisons

Key information regarding the principles, attributes, scope, risk classifications, strengths, and weaknesses of the six models was qualitatively analyzed based on review of the literature and discussion among experts. The literature databases queried were Web of Science, PubMed, Medline, Scopus, and related official websites. Search terms used were “risk assessment”, “occupational health”, “methodology”, and “model”.

A multi-criteria qualitative analysis was subsequently established based on this analysis of key information and included the following steps: determination of evaluation indicators, assignment of indicator values and weights, expert consultation, interview with key informants, and comprehensive analysis. The evaluation indicators were determined based on the literature review and expert consultation, in which 30 experts in the field of health management or occupational health were asked for advice on evaluating indicators in two rounds. The seven selected indicators are shown in Table 2. Rather than using different quantification scores, most of the consulted experts considered it appropriate to divide each indicator into low, medium, and high levels, which were assigned 1, 2, and 3 points, respectively. However, the practicability (whether or not the model provides strategies for control) and operability (whether or not the model is easy to use) indicators were only divided into 2 levels (high and low), because the medium level was difficult to define. To assign indicator weight, 83.3% of experts agreed that the weight of the seven indicators should be equivalent, meaning that each indicator was equally important. The rationality of the framework for qualita-
Table 2. Scoring system used for the multi-criteria analysis.

| Criteria (Indicators) | Scores (levels) |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
|                       | 1 (Low)         | 2 (Medium)   | 3 (High)     |
| Evaluated Substance   | Chemicals       | Chemicals, dust | Chemicals, dust, physical agents |
| Attribute             | Qualitative     | Semi-quantitative | Quantitative |
| Validation            | No              | The model is validated by a few documents | The model is validated by adequate documents with independent data |
| Reliability           | Depends on subjective judgments | Partly depends on experimental data | Depends on experimental or epidemiological data |
| Guidance              | No guidance available | Guidance manuals are available, but lack examples of applications | Guidance manuals are available and give many examples of applications |
| Practicability        | No control strategy is available | - | Control strategy is available |
| Operability           | Complicated to use | - | Easy to use |

Quantitative Comparisons

The RR is defined as the ratio between the risk level of a particular risk factor (obtained through the given model) and the maximum risk level for that model. For example, in the Singapore model the risk level for benzene at a paint spraying location is 3, while the maximum risk level is 5. Hence the RR of benzene is 0.6 (3/5). RRs represent the relative risk levels and are therefore comparable across different models.

Each model has its own maximum risk level based on its methodology. For example, while the maximum risk level for the Romanian model is 7, it is 5 for the Singaporean model. However, the EPA model only provides two risk levels (< 1 or ≥ 1), and the COSHH model only provides four risk control levels. To calculate the RRs of the EPA and COSHH models, their risk rank was converted based on the classification criteria of the Singapore model. In the Singapore model, four specific cut points (i.e., 0.1, 0.5, 1.0 and 2.0 times the permissible exposure limit [PEL]) are used to categorize the exposure ratings (ER). The five total risk levels are then calculated based on the five levels of ER and HR. Generally, amounts 0.1 and 0.5 times greater than the PEL as established by the NIOSH and OHSA in the USA are considered as the safety and action levels, respectively. Based on these considerations, the two risk levels (< 1 or ≥ 1) of the hazardous quotient (HQ) for the non-carcinogenic evaluation in the EPA model were re-categorized into five maximum risk ranks (e.g., < 0.1, 0.1-0.5, 0.5-1.0, 1.0-2.0, and ≥ 2). The four risk control levels of the COSHH model were converted into five maximum risk ranks based on a comparative study \textsuperscript{19,32} which assessed a parallel between the risk control levels obtained from the COSHH and the Singaporean models, in which the control strategy (CS) levels of 2, 3, and 4 were equivalent to risk levels of 3, 4, and 5.

Statistical Analysis

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the RRs for each individual hazard from the various OHRA models using the LSD comparison method when variances were equal, or the Dunnett T3 comparison method when variances were heterogeneous. The Spearman correlation analysis (abnormal distribution) was utilized to analyze the correlation of RRs.

Results

Qualitative Differences in Key Information between Different Models

Table 3 summarizes the key information for the different OHRA models. The methodological principles of the various OHRA models are different in their hazard and exposure assessment approaches. For example, while the EPA model uses a quantitative dose-response assessment, the COSHH Essential model is based on the hazard or exposure banding approach, the Singapore model uses a...
the practicability and operability indicators, the Singapore model had greater scores. For the evaluation indicators, each model has its own score for the seven evaluation indicators. For the validation, reliability, and guidance indicators, the EPA, Singapore, and COSHH models were ranked at relatively higher levels than the other models, and thus had greater scores. For the practicability and operability indicators, the Singaporean, Australian, and ICMM models’ levels were relatively higher and consequently got higher scores. On the whole, the total scores for the Singaporean, COSHH, and EPA models were 19, 17, and 15, respectively, which were greater than that for the Australian, Romanian, or ICMM models (13 for each).

Quantitative Differences in Risk Ratios between the Different Models

Table 4 and Fig. 2 show the results of the quantitative comparisons between the different models. Fig. 2 illustrates that the risk ratios (RRs) obtained from the EPA, COSHH, and Singapore models in the electroplating industry were significantly higher than those in the wood furniture manufacturing industry or crane manufacturing industry ($P < 0.05$). This finding was consistent with the electroplating industry’s own risk assessment classification of the “most severe” level. Likewise, the relatively semi-quantitative risk calculation based on hazard and exposure classifications, and many qualitative models like the Australian, Romanian, and ICMM models are based on a matrix method. Each model has its own strengths and limitations.

Table 3. Qualitative differences in key information between the different models.

| Model                     | Attribute       | Scope                               | Assessment method       | Risk classification | Strengths                                                                 | Weaknesses                                                                 |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EPA [9]                   | Quantitative    | Chemicals                           | Dose-response assessment| 2 levels            | 1. Carcinogenic and non-carcinogenic assessment 2. Reliability based on epidemiological or toxicological data | 1. Limited to chemical poisons with IUR and RfC values 2. Difficult to differentiate multiple risk levels |
| Australia [11]            | Qualitative     | Chemicals, physical factors, and dust| Manual diagram          | 5 levels            | 1. Good operability and ease of use 2. Broad scope of evaluated substances 3. Appropriate for moderate- and small-sized businesses | 1. Relies on subjective judgment 2. Requires professional knowledge |
| Romania [12]              | Qualitative     | Chemicals, physical factors, and dust| Matrix                  | 7 levels            | 1. Broad scope of evaluated substances 2. Calculation of total risk level | 1. Relies on subjective judgment 2. Difficult to judge the probability of consequences or adverse events |
| Singapore [13, 33]        | Semi-quantitative | Chemicals and dust | Semi-quantitative calculation | 5 levels            | 1. Uses both quantitative and qualitative methods 2. Uses an exposure index method when air monitoring data is absent | 1. The exposure index classification is relatively crude |
| ICMM [15]                 | Qualitative     | Chemicals, physical factors, and dust| Matrix, quantitative rating| 4 levels            | 1. Broad scope of evaluated substances 2. Application to various industries | 1. Relies on subjective judgment 2. Overestimates risk using the quantitative rating method |
| COSHH Essentials [17, 22, 33] | Qualitative | Chemicals and dust | Banding                  | 4 levels            | 1. Good operability and ease of use 2. Focuses on middle- and small-sized businesses | 1. Overestimates risk levels 2. Occurrence of bias when judging liquid volatility |

Numbers in brackets indicate literature references.
lower RRs in the wood furniture manufacturing industry or crane manufacturing industry agreed with their “relatively severe” level risk classification. The other three models did not differentiate between the RRs for the different industries. Table 4 shows that the EPA model yielded the highest average RR (0.83 ± 0.29) in all three industries (P < 0.05). The RRs of the COSHH, Singaporean, and Australian models were second-highest, and the Romanian and ICMM models had the lowest RR values. Thus, the order of the RRs for the six models is RR EPA > RR Singapore, RR COSHH, and RR Australia > RR ICMM and RR Romania (P < 0.05).

The correlation analysis of RRs among the six models showed that the EPA model did not correlate with the other five models (P > 0.05). The COSHH RRs only correlated with those of the Singaporean model (correlation coefficient 0.437, P < 0.05). The RRs of the Singaporean model correlated with those of the Romanian, Australian, and ICMM model (correlation coefficients 0.802, 0.887, and 0.693, respectively; P < 0.01). Similarly, there was a positive correlation between the Romanian, Australian, and ICMM models (P < 0.05).

Discussion

Theoretical frameworks for comparative studies of different OHRA models have not been widely reported. This study aimed to explain the qualitative and quantitative differences in the methodologies using approaches such as literature review, expert consultation, multi-criteria analysis, and quantitative analysis using RRs. The theoretical framework established in this study proved to be effective.

Analysis of key information for the different OHRA models showed that the methodological principles for individual hazard or exposure assessments can be quite different between models. For example, while the EPA model uses a quantitative dose-response assessment, the COSHH Essential model is based on a banding approach, the Singaporean model uses a semi-quantitative risk calculation, and many qualitative models are based on matrix methods. As a result, each model possesses its own strengths and limitations based on their methodologies. The results obtained from our key information analysis strategy are consistent with other reviews on OHRA methodology. More studies should be conducted to examine the strengths and weaknesses of different models and assist in their further refinement and utility.

The multi-criteria analysis further evaluated the qualitative differences between the different models. A radar diagram showed that the OHRA models exhibited a diverse combination of high and low rankings for the different evaluation indicators, suggesting that several factors must be considered when using multiple models to per-
| Industry                  | Risk classification | n  | EPA model           | Australian model      | Romanian model       | Singaporean model\(^\text{e}\) | ICMM model       | COSHH model       |
|--------------------------|---------------------|----|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Wood furniture manufacturing | Relatively severe   | 60 | Low~ extremely high 0.80±0.30 | Moderate~ high 0.52±0.92 | Very low~ medium 0.38±0.73 | Low~ high 0.53±0.14 | Low~ medium 0.44±0.25 | Low~ extremely high 0.64±0.27 |
| Electroplating            | Most severe         | 15 | Extremely high 1.00±0.00\(^f\) | Moderate~ high 0.54±0.15 | Minimal~ low 0.30±0.12 | Medium~ high 0.64±0.90\(^f\) | Low~ medium 0.38±0.18 | Medium~ extremely high 0.80±0.20\(^f\) |
| Crane manufacturing       | Relatively severe   | 93 | Negligible~ extremely high 0.84±0.30 | Low~ high 0.65±0.14 | Very low~ low 0.43±0.10 | Low~ medium 0.50±0.13 | Low~ high 0.36±0.17 | Low~ extremely high 0.63±0.22 |
| Total                     |                     | 168 | Negligible~ extremely high 0.83±0.29\(^ab\) | Low~ high 0.57±0.23\(^b\) | Minimal~ medium 0.40±0.10 | Negligible~ high 0.59±0.16\(^b\) | Low~ high 0.39±0.20 | Low~ extremely high 0.65±0.24\(^b\) |

RR: risk ratio; n: total number of risk levels for all risk factors in three enterprises of each industry using a risk assessment model; Risk level: the range of risk levels for all risk factors evaluated by each model. Risk calculations are according to the "Management catalog of occupational hazard risk classification of construction projects" (2012 edition) issued by the State Administration of Work Safety of China.

\(^a\)P < 0.05 compared to the ICMM model; \(^b\)P < 0.05 compared to the Romanian model; \(^c\) P < 0.05 compared to the Singaporean model; \(^d\) P < 0.05 compared to the Australian model; \(^e\) P < 0.05 compared to the COSHH model; \(^f\) P < 0.05 compared with the wood furniture manufacturing or crane manufacturing industry. \(^\text{ab}\) The average risk ratios were calculated based on the exposure ratio (ER) and exposure index (EI) methods in the Singapore model.
form OHRA. Our results suggest that the EPA, COSHH, and Singapore models might achieve more accurate outcomes since they are based on independent experimental or epidemiological data, and thus may exhibit better reliability and validity. These three models also provide good guidance for their implementation through multiple approaches like official websites or published documents. Both the COSHH model and the Singapore model were considered more practical than other models since they provide detailed control strategies to reduce occupational health risks. In addition, all of the qualitative and semi-quantitative models were relatively easy to use in terms of operability. When all of the evaluation indicators were considered, the Singapore, COSHH, and EPA models got higher total scores, suggesting that these models might be the most appropriate for OHRA practice in the workplace due to their comparative advantages, especially in reliability.

The qualitative reliability assessments for these three models were supported by quantitative comparisons. Fig. 2 shows that the RRs derived from the EPA, COSHH, and Singaporean models are consistent with the current risk classifications in the examined industries, suggesting that in some industries these models are able to more accurately identify high occupational risk than the Romanian, Australian and ICMM models. The quantitative comparisons also validated the qualitative comparison results. Since the EPA, Singapore and COSHH models use quantitative, semi-quantitative, and qualitative methods, respectively, combining these three models might be advantageous when performing OHRA. Our research team has previously proposed that quantitative, semi-quantitative, and qualitative methods can be applied in combination when conducting OHRA\(^\text{16}\). Table 4 shows that the RR for the EPA was significantly greater than the RRs for the COSHH, Singaporean, and Australian models; which in turn were greater than the RRs for the ICMM and Romanian models. This indicates that the use of different models will yield diverse risk assessment results. This phenomenon also reminds users of the necessity for careful selection of evaluation models. The relatively smaller RRs of the Australian, ICMM, and Romanian models might be due to underestimation of risk levels, which are usually determined based on the subjective judgments of the users.

Correlation analysis using the RRs was used to test the agreement between the different models, and found that the EPA model was strongly independent, with no correlation with the other five models. This is because the EPA model only applies the IUR and RfC values when determining chemical toxicity, resulting in a relatively narrow scope\(^\text{9}\). Additionally, the COSHH model only correlated with the Singapore model, indicating that the COSHH model was also relatively independent. This might be due to the unique banding evaluation method used in the COSHH model, which is quite different from the matrix method used by the other qualitative OHRA models. The correlation between the RRs of the COSHH and Singapore models is supported by a previous parallel study which concluded that the CS levels of 2, 3, and 4 in the
COSH model were equivalent to the risk levels of 3, 4, and 5 in the Singapore model. The Singapore model correlated with all models except for the EPA model, suggesting the Singapore model has good overall compatibility. This is because the Singapore model, as a semi-quantitative method, possesses characteristics of both the quantitative and qualitative models, and thus is able to make up for the shortcomings of the quantitative and qualitative methods. Finally, good consistency was found between the three similar qualitative models, i.e. the ICMM, Australian, and Romanian models.

The main limitation of this study is the small number of enterprises tested in each industry. This case study considered only nine factories in three industries. It would be useful to replicate the study in many more factories to further compare the models and to see if they perform similarly across multiple samples.

**Conclusion**

The following conclusions can be drawn from this study: (1) the theoretical framework developed here can distinguish qualitative and quantitative differences between the different OHRA models, (2) each model possesses its own strengths and limitations depending on its unique methodological approach, (3) due to their comprehensive advantages, it may be advantageous to combine the EPA, Singapore and COSHH models when developing an OHRA strategy, and (4) the Singapore model best parallels the other OHRA models in terms of RRs, while the EPA model is highly independent. This study lays a foundation for strengthening the theoretical framework of these OHRA models, and also provides a recommendation for joint application of risk assessment methods, which will benefit the establishment and improvement of OHRA technical specifications in developing countries. More comparative studies using multiple methods should be conducted in key industries with a high probability of occupational health hazards.

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