WORKED OVER

We go to work, we work hard, we've got a backlog, we feel stressed, we fetch the kids, we're late, we argue, we go to bed. For more and more of us, working isn't working.

A September 2000 government guide, *Creating a work-life balance - a good practice guide for employers* noted: "'Work-life balance' isn't just about a women juggling a home and family – although that is certainly an important part of it. It's also about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, can find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations."

Instead, effort is likely to be spent on treating the symptoms, not the cause. The government's "Work-life Balance 2000" survey found that companies were more likely to offer stress counselling (49 per cent) than offer assistance with basic childcare needs (9 per cent). Most workplaces (80 per cent) have employees working more than their standard hours.

The work-life balance paragraph in HSE's new stress guide for employers, *Tackling stress at work: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being* (page 14), notes: "Flexibility in your employment practices can help you increase productivity, attract the skilled, experienced and motivated staff you need – and retain them in a competitive marketplace. It is about giving people working options that fit in with your business needs – and that may relieve potential stresses on your employees to produce a more focused, committed team."

Work can affect every aspect of our health, safety, welfare and well-being, for every moment of our lives. Safety reps should make sure that all the implications of bad work practices and organisation, inside and outside of work, are addressed when negotiating improvements. "World mapping" can make that task less daunting.

Map your world

World mapping is a do-it-yourself research tool, a complement to body mapping (*Hazards* 61) and risk mapping (*Hazards* 60). It is a way of examining all those niggling, hurting, irritating problems arising out of the job, and assessing how they impact on your entire life.

The approach is very simple, but it can illustrate – literally – how problems outside of work arise from the problems inside work. Instead of negotiating health and safety improvements piecemeal, real underlying issues can be identified and tackled.

What to do

1 The safety rep should call together a group of workers. This should happen in work time - safety reps are allowed by law to consult with the members they represent, and to investigate any problems they identify. However, mapping can be quick and easy, so could take place during breaks if this is an easier way to pull a group together.

2 Take a large piece of drawing paper. Draw a human figure at the centre of the paper and pin it on the wall.

3 Ask the group to draw anything that comes into their heads that demonstrates some aspect of how work affects their health. This bit is like workplace pictionary. As participants doodle, they explain what they are drawing and why. A sketch or photo of a baby or a child is a reminder of inadequate childcare; a football might indicate how you used to play sports until the job made you wheezy; an empty bed, that you can't remember your last good night's sleep; and an ashtray or half-empty beer glass might illustrate how the fitness plan has gone down the tubes.

4 Write down the main themes emerging, listing causes and effects of problems. Use this list to set priorities and timelines for action. Decide who is going to do what and when.

Working hours Tired All The Time (TATT) is a commonplace work health problem (*Hazards* 45 and 49). Work too long and there is little time for family responsibilities. Overwork-related suicide, depression and chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS or ME) have all been recognised as occupational diseases elsewhere (*Hazards* 69; also page 22) and have been compensated

Depression The International Labour Office warns that an "epidemic" of work-related depression, anxiety, stress and burnout is blighting modern workplaces (*Hazards* 72). Not having much say at work and a high workload can induce depression and dysphoria, short-term sadness, US researchers reported last year (*Hazards* 73).

Women workers US government research published in 2000 concluded gender-specific work stress factors, such as sex discrimination and balancing work and family demands, compounds job stress. It said firms that actively discourage sexual discrimination and harassment, and promote family-friendly policies, appear to foster worker loyalty across the entire workforce (*Hazards* 71).

Low pay , low staffing Bad pay, performance-related pay and bonus schemes can put unacceptable pressure on workers to work harder and faster. The same goes for under-staffing. In some US states there is now "safe staffing" legislation. Last year HSE blocked staff cuts at BNFL because of safety fears (*Hazards* 69).

Racism A July 2000 report from the TUC, *Exposing racism at work*, concluded that verbal and physical racist abuse is causing sickness absence through stress, depression and anxiety (*Hazards* 72). UK and international research has shown there are marked racial inequalities in occupational health, with minority workers more likely to be concentrated in the most hazardous jobs.

Relationships A TUC report in 2000 warned that in "burnout Britain" over half of workers find it hard to cope with the pressures of work. It added that more than 12 million people believe stress at work has made them irritable and bad tempered at home (*Hazards* 72).

Lifestyle Drug, alcohol and tobacco misuse have all been linked to bad jobs (*Hazards* 55). A December 2000 study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* concluded that where work problems interfered with family life, affected workers were three times more likely to have a mood disorder such as depression, 2.5 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder and twice as likely to have a "substance dependence disorder." Diet and appetite are both adversely affected by unsatifactory work patterns and hours. You may have little time or energy for leisure or fitness interests.

Reproduction Recent reports have linked stress, job fatigue and overwork to adverse pregnany outcome (*Hazards* 74). An April 2000 report in the journal *Obstetrics and Gynaecology* revealed a "significant association of physically demanding work, prolonged standing, and shift and night work, with adverse outcome of pregnancy" (*Hazards* 70). The link between a range of job factors and the reproductive health of men (*Hazards* 64) and women (*Hazards* 63) is well-established.

Sick leave Work affects our health and health affects our work. Punitive sickness absence policies are making matters worse (*Hazards* 66). Firing workers with chronic fatigue syndrome, asthma and mental health problems have all been found to break disability laws, but some employers discriminate regardless.

Violence Bad management can cause intolerable frustration, leading to violence inside and outside the workplace, US researchers concluded (*Hazards* 65).

Resources

Hazards DIY research webpage: Contains information on body mapping, risk mapping, world mapping, worker-friendly research methods and TUC health and safety training. www.hazards.org/diyresearch/

Creating a work-life balance - good practice guide for employers. Free from DfES Publications, tel. 0845 60 222 60. Quote ref: WLBGPGE1. Also free on the government's Work-Life Balance Team website at: www.dfee.gov.uk/work-balance/
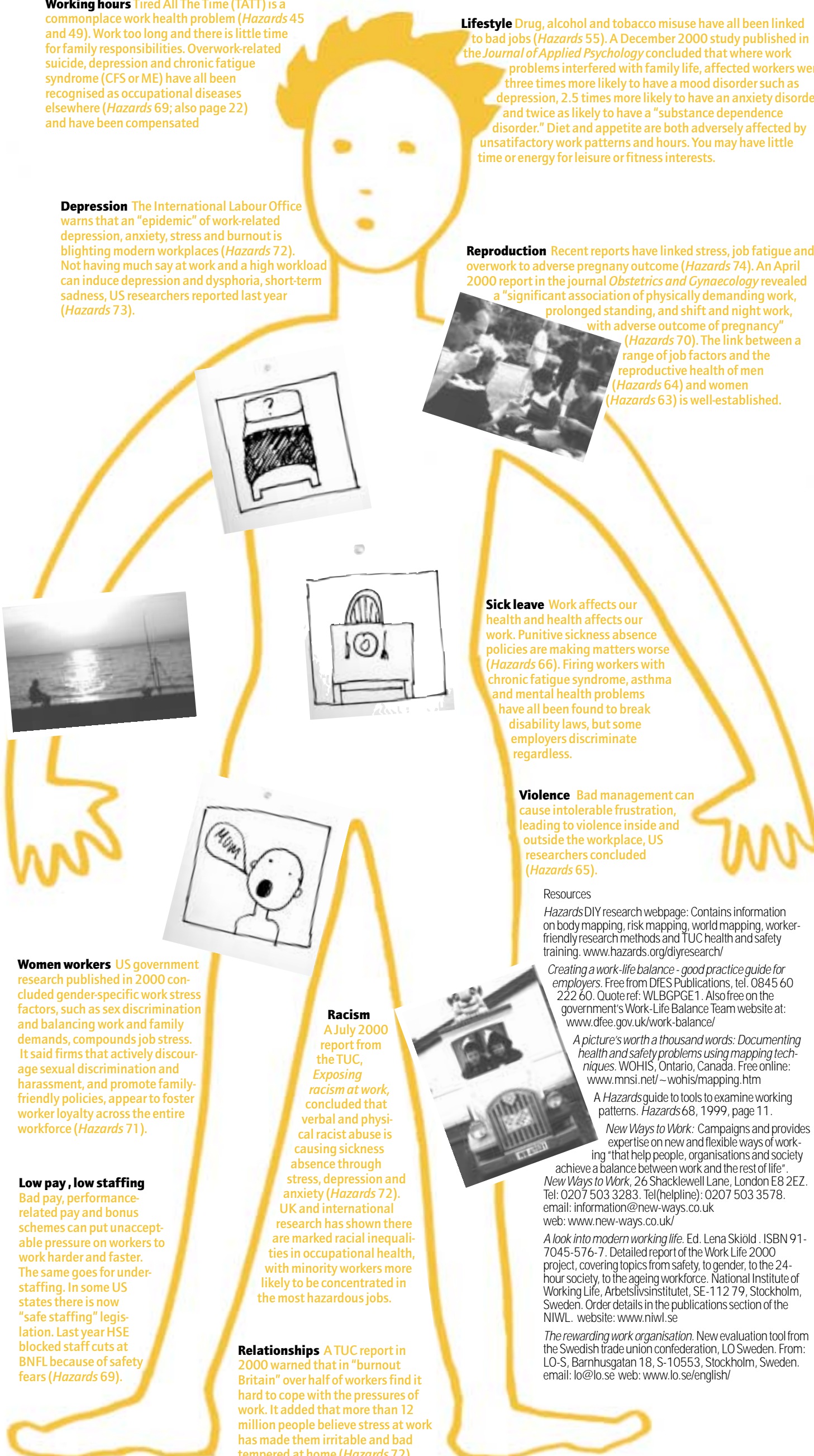
A picture's worth a thousand words: Documenting health and safety problems using mapping techniques. WOHIS, Ontario, Canada. Free online: www.mnsi.net/~wohis/mapping.htm

A *Hazards* guide to tools to examine working patterns. *Hazards* 68, 1999, page 11.

New Ways to Work: Campaigns and provides expertise on new and flexible ways of working "that help people, organisations and society achieve a balance between work and the rest of life". *New Ways to Work*, 26 Shacklewell Lane, London E8 2EZ. Tel: 0207 503 3283. Tel(helpline): 0207 503 3578. email: information@new-ways.co.uk web: www.new-ways.co.uk/

A look into modern working life. Ed. Lena Skiöld . ISBN 91-7045-576-7. Detailed report of the Work Life 2000 project, covering topics from safety, to gender, to the 24-hour society, to the ageing workforce. National Institute of Working Life, Arbetslivsinstitutet, SE-112 79, Stockholm, Sweden. Order details in the publications section of the NIWL. website: www.niwl.se

The rewarding work organisation. New evaluation tool from the Swedish trade union confederation, LO Sweden. From: LO-S, Barnhusgatan 18, S-10553, Stockholm, Sweden. email: lo@lo.se web: www.lo.se/english/