It is the thoroughly modern way to die at work. Major occupational diseases of the 21st century will be heart attacks, suicide and strokes. Hazards editor Rory O’Neill looks at why so many of us are being worked into the ground.

Heart attack

In Japan, “management by stress” (Hazards 51) led to the emergence of karoshi – death from overwork – as an official occupational disease, with the dependants of workers dying from overwork related stroke (cerebrovascular disease) or heart disease eligible for state payouts.

In 2001/02, there was a record 690 claims resulting in 134 confirmed cases. 47 related to sudden deaths from heart disease and 96 from stroke. In 2002/03, the number of cases was higher still, up to 160 of the 819 claims receiving compensation. The increase in part explained by a rule change to take account of cumulative fatigue. A worker dying after regularly working over 80 plus hours per month would now qualify. For example:

Less than 44.5 hours overtime in each month prior to death is considered “weak” evidence, but the association is assumed to get stronger as overtime increases.

The rules say karoshi risk factors include extremely long hours, long-term excessive work, regular irregular work hours, long hours with inadequate breaks, shiftwork and nightwork and work-related stress.

About two thirds of the karoshi deaths are in men in their 40s or 50s.

Karoshi in the UK

A government survey published last year found there had been a steep rise in the number of people working excessive hours – taking millions of UK workers into the karoshi zone. The DTI research found 16 per cent of the workers surveyed – 1 in every 6 workers – were working over 60 hours a week, up from 12 per cent in 2000. DTI found one in five men (19 per cent) had visited the doctor because of stress, rising to one quarter (23 per cent) of over 40s (Hazards 80).

That’s not the only evidence we are feeling the strain. TUC figures show unions started almost 9,000 new stress compensation cases in the years 2000 and 2001, accounting for about 10 per cent of all union personal injury cases and far outstripping the number of asbestos claims.

And things could be about to get worse. In July 2003 the government proposed abolishing the mandatory retirement age of 65 years. The old notion that we “work to live, not live to work” could soon be superseded by “we work until we drop.”

We all have to die of something, of course – and cardiovasculary and respiratory diseases are Britain’s top killer. But even if your job does not determine what kills you, it could be why you get that bit sooner.

Driven to suicide

A 2003 analysis by the Samaritans reports: “It is commonly accepted that high stress, together with easy access to means, are important factors which put people in certain occupations at greater risk of dying by suicide.” Evidence suggests workplace problems could explain a shockingly high proportion. A November 2002 study in the Australian state of Victoria, found work was a significant factor in 109 suicides in the years 1989–2000.

Applied to the UK, this would suggest there are well over 100 cases of work-related suicide each year, making it one of the UK’s top work-related killers. The Samaritans say their total is likely to be an underestimate because coroner’s data is not designed to make work links.

In 2002/03 Japan compensated the dependants of a record 46 victims of karjojisatsu, suicide resulting from overwork.

Official statistics suggest about five per cent of all suicide deaths in Japan are “company related,” The Japan Times reported in 10 May 2003. In July 2003, the widow of a 35-year-old Toyota Motor Corp employee who took his own life in 1988 as a result of overwork became the latest recipient of karjojisatsu compensation.

Multinationals like Toyota operate similar management regimes worldwide. Earlier in this year auto union CWA fought off a bid by the company to force compulsory overtime on workers at a Canadian plant (Hazards 82).

References


Resources

Hazards offers a free webpage: www.hazards.org.uk
UK National Links Network: www.workstress.net
BFlyOnsite: www.bflyonsite.org
Samaritans: www.samaritans.org
Hazards, PO BOX 199 SHEFFIELD S1 4YL

Events

In July 2002, postal union CWU called for a campaign to make the industry a safer place for all. A recent report showed a black Birmingham Mail Centre worker, 26-year-old Jermaine Lee (above), took his own life after enduring constant racist bullying.