

UNIONS ARE TACKLING THE WORKPLACE STRAIN INJURIES EPIDEMIC

Europe under strain

Work-related strains are the European Union's No.1 occupational health problem. Now the first ever Europe-wide trade union campaign is to get to grips with the strain injury epidemic.



What's the problem?

Why, with today's occupational health, ergonomic and design

knowledge, with the regulation and enforcement of minimum working conditions, are musculoskeletal disorders blighting more and more workplaces? *Europe under strain*, a new, detailed TUC-backed European campaign guide, spells out why.

Old hazards: Lifting, carrying and boring repetitive work in traditional jobs still affects a large proportion of the working population. One in three workers in Europe still have to pull, drag, handle or lift heavy weights as part of their job.

New hazards: New management and production methods are increasing the physical and mental pressures on workers, creating a new generation of high risk jobs.

Increasing hazards: Risk factors for strain injuries including highly paced work, long hours, tight deadlines, mechanisation, new technology and a lack of worker control over the design and execution of the job are increasing in the European Union.

Unions cure strains

Action by the TUC and UK unions - major compensation victories, campaigns for better workplaces and work systems, including the TUC's highly regarded *Don't suffer in silence* campaign - has been the most powerful force challenging Britain's strains epidemic.

The story is repeated elsewhere in the world. The upward trend in strains cases was curtailed in Australia and the USA after high profile union campaigns. Europe's unions have made similar inroads.

Global action: Swedish union federation TCO introduces a stringent ergonomic and environmental standard for visual display unit operation and design. It opens offices in Sweden and the USA to promote safer design of computer hardware and software. Soon the major VDU manufacturers worldwide adopt this TCO99 standard.

Causes and solutions

Occupational health researchers have identified five groups of risk factors for workplace strains and sprains, and measures to combat them. Some are more worker-friendly than others, so union reps should always consider the implications of strain reduction initiatives.

Risk factor 1 Repetitiveness

- Solutions
- ◆ Use mechanical aids
 - ◆ Enlarge work content by adding more diverse activities
 - ◆ Automate certain tasks
 - ◆ Rotate workers
 - ◆ Increase rest allowances
 - ◆ Spread work uniformly across work shift
 - ◆ Restructure jobs

Risk factor 2 Force/mechanical stress

- Solutions
- ◆ Decrease weight of tools/containers and parts
 - ◆ Increase friction between handles and hand
 - ◆ Optimise size and shape of handles
 - ◆ Improve mechanical advantage
 - ◆ Select gloves to minimise effects on performance
 - ◆ Balance hand-held tools and containers
 - ◆ Use torque control devices
 - ◆ Enlarge corners and edges
 - ◆ Use pads and cushions

Risk factor 3 Posture

- Solutions
- ◆ Locate work to reduce awkward postures
 - ◆ Alter position to tool to avoid bending of wrist
 - ◆ Move part closer to worker
 - ◆ Move worker to reduce awkward postures
 - ◆ Select tool design for workstation

Risk factor 4 Vibration

- Solutions
- ◆ Select tools with minimum vibration
 - ◆ Select process to minimise surface and edge finishing
 - ◆ Use mechanical assistance
 - ◆ Use isolation for tools that operate above resonance point
 - ◆ Provide damping for tools that operate at resonance point
 - ◆ Adjust tool speed to avoid resonance

Risk factor 5 Psychosocial stresses

- Solutions
- ◆ Enlarge workers' task duties
 - ◆ Allow more worker control over pattern of work
 - ◆ Provide micro work pauses
 - ◆ Minimise paced work
 - ◆ Eliminate blind electronic monitoring

Campaign resources

Europe under strain: A report of trade union initiatives to combat workplace musculoskeletal disorders is the main resource book for the European Trade Union Confederation's Europe-wide strain injuries campaign. The 128 page TUC-backed book is fully illustrated and contains detailed case histories of successful union initiatives throughout Europe and beyond, has guides to strains recognition and prevention and has very thorough resource lists.

ISBN 2-930003-29-4 £14.00 plus £1.50 p+p from TUTB, Bd Roi Albert II, Bte 5, B-1210, Brussels, Belgium. Tel: 00 322 224 0560. Fax: 00 322 224 0561. email: tutb@etuc.org

It can also be ordered via the TUTB website (payment by credit card): <http://www.etuc.org/tutb>

There are concessionary rates available to trade unionists, students and for bulk orders - contact Janine Delahaut at TUTB for details.

Strains policy



Whatever assessment and preventive measures are introduced, there must also be safeguards in place. The UK TUC has developed a model policy, summarised below.

Aims The aim of this agreement is to provide a healthy and safe working environment and to prevent the development of RSI. The employer and the union recognise that there must be a programme of preventive action.

This will include to an employer commitment to: consult the union; to conduct risk assessments for potentially hazardous tasks and when there are significant changes to the work systems, work methods, equipment, environment or training; to implement any necessary changes; and to properly resource education and training measures. Employers should also use a union agreed medical practitioner experienced in RSI to monitor staff on a regular basis. They will undertake not to victimise or harass employees who develop RSI or report symptoms.

Risk assessments Risk assessments covering work equipment, workplaces and methods will consider:

- ◆ frequency and duration of repetitive movements;
- ◆ force used in performing the movements;
- ◆ absence of adequate recuperative breaks;
- ◆ awkward postures, particularly degree of fixed muscle loading in the trunk, shoulders and arms;
- ◆ degree of stress involved in the job contributed to by its boring and monotonous nature or lack of opportunity for initiative, responsibility or individuality;
- ◆ sudden changes in work rate or fast pace of work;

◆ individual monitoring of work leading to stress and work pressure;

◆ vibration.

The risk assessment will involve union and management assessors and reports by independent competent persons. Employees will be involved in the risk assessment and be provided with a copy of it.

Information, education and training The employer will consult with the union regarding an education programme for employees which will include all risk assessment and preventive efforts including incidence monitoring and reporting, training, remedial efforts, information provision, policy development and training of managers and supervisors in the sympathetic handling of known or potential cases. Safety representatives will be entitled to time off with pay to attend TUC and union courses dealing with RSI.

Work routine Management and the unions agree that a reasonable work rate varies with the capabilities of individual workers. The availability of rest breaks in work involving RSI risk factors is necessary to avoid the accumulation of fatigue and strain which contribute to RSI. Breaks in work involving RSI risk factors will therefore be provided on the basis of a total of 15 minutes during each hour, additional to personal health and meal breaks.

Notification Early reporting of signs and symptoms of RSI should be required, with this information logged in the accident book.

◆ Line managers will have responsibility for monitoring and reviewing the incidence of signs and symptoms and for proposing remedial action;

◆ Safety representatives will be informed periodically of the incidence of signs and symptoms in their area of responsibility and whenever the incidence rate rises appreciably;

◆ Annual statistics will be supplied to the health and safety committee.

Diagnosed conditions When a case of RSI is medically diagnosed, management will assess

necessary action on the basis of medical advice, including the nature, causes, extent and response to a strain injury case.

These steps will be taken:

- ◆ A review of the risk assessment of the job by an independent competent person agreed by both management and union;
- ◆ Provision of the assessment and reports to the employee concerned;
- ◆ Implementation, as appropriate, of changes necessary to enable the employee to return to their position, or of suitable retraining and redeployment;
- ◆ Access to the workplace by the health professionals treating the employee;
- ◆ Training of the employee in ergonomic and preventive principles (also see Making the job fit, ergonomics factsheet, Hazards 56).

Redeployment Where the employee is redeployed:

- ◆ Job security will be a primary objective and sick leave will be paid (also see Sickness absence policies factsheet, Hazards 66);
- ◆ There will be full consultation with the employee on career options and procedures prior to any decisions being taken;
- ◆ Detailed job descriptions of prospective positions will be provided to the employees, their medical practitioner and their union;
- ◆ Modifications to prospective positions to make them suitable will be undertaken where necessary;
- ◆ A graduated return to work will be allowed with no pressure to return until fully fit (also see Disability Discrimination Act factsheet, Hazards 59).

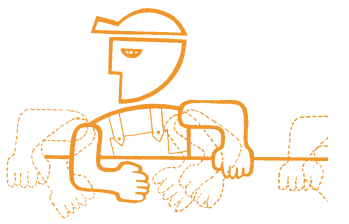
Monitoring and review Regular monitoring and annual review of this policy will be carried out by the health and safety committee and any difficulties reported to the person responsible for the implementation of the policy.



BODY MAPPED: The TUC says Britain is facing a back pain epidemic, and is urging union reps to use "body maps" to encourage employers to take the problem seriously. Body mapping - first promoted in the UK by Hazards (see Hazards 61) - lets workers map out where they hurt and work out what work factors might be responsible. TUC says reps should be particularly aware of the increased risk to women workers (also see Women hurt at work, Hazards 67).

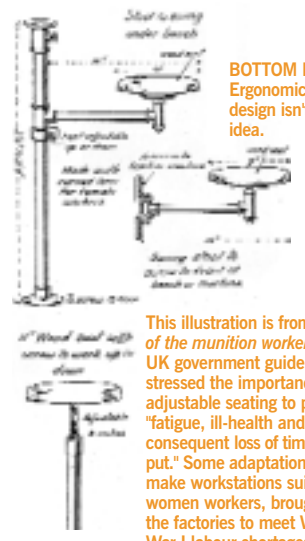
TUC report: *Putting back pain on the map*. Free with large SAE from Women's back strain, TUC, 23-28 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. A body mapping poster and a leaflet, both titled *Your back: Where does it hurt?*, are available free from the same address.

RITMI ECCESSIVI. MON RIPETITIVITA'



National action: Italian union FIOM fights for decades for ergonomic improvements in the workplace. Only in 1997, after FIOM court compensation victories, does the Italian government recognise the existence of work-related strain injuries.

Industry action: A Danish textile union uncovers widespread neck and shoulder injuries in sewing machinists. It campaigns for and wins recognition of the condition as a new industrial disease. Hundreds of sufferers are awarded compensation.



BOTTOM LINE: Ergonomic design isn't a new idea.

This illustration is from *Health of the munition worker*, a 1917 UK government guide that stressed the importance of adjustable seating to prevent "fatigue, ill-health and consequent loss of time and output." Some adaptations were to make workstations suitable for women workers, brought into the factories to meet World War I labour shortages.