

# When work is a pain

Young workers are facing a repetitive strain injury epidemic, according to the TUC. Using official data, the TUC claims that a whole generation of workers could become victims, devastating the British economy and leaving millions in pain. Jacqueline Paige reports.

**T**he Health and Safety Executive (HSE) figures reveal that young workers are more

at risk than any other age group on not one, or even two, but on every single one of the four main risk factors associated with RSI; repetition and speed, awkward posture, lack of control over the work process, and the use of force (see right). Nearly 4 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are in work.

"These statistics point to the future of British industry being bleak because if a high percentage of our young workers already suffer from RSI, then businesses of the future will have a limited workforce to choose from," said Roger Lyons, general secretary of the union MSF.

TUC general secretary John Monks adds: "Young workers are at risk whenever managers fail to assess risks, casualise the work and cut corners on decent worksta-

tions, because they often don't know their rights, can't complain and haven't got a union."

Others see the emergence of the e-economy and all things digital as the root cause of this simmering problem. Computer manufacturers in particular have had the finger pointed at them. "By failing to promote a safety culture, young people are 'subconsciously trained' to think its okay to sit at a poorly designed desk and chair, to slouch, to work without breaks," said Wendy Lawrence, Chair of the RSI Association.

A UK survey for the association carried out in *PC World* magazine found that "not one had any health and safety guidance on keybreaks, posture or anything," said Lawrence. "And the deadly mouse was sitting there so docile - and yet is responsible through bad design for a painful form of RSI."

The case of Michelle Gould, the graphic designer



Graphic: Adam Smoczynski, Central Institute for Labour Protection, Poland

**Teen torture:** Teenagers taking jobs while they study are at higher risk of strain injuries. A University of Montreal study of 502 students aged 13 to 15 found that after a year "38 per cent of students who were initially pain-free developed muscle and joint pain... you were three times as likely in white collar and two times as likely in a blue collar job." The researchers, speaking at the November 2000 American Public Health Association conference, said: "Prevention strategies in the workplace should include working teens, even if they only work part-time."

**Nintendonitis:** A doctor has warned about the danger of computer games after treating an 11-year-old boy for repetitive strain injury. Dr Diane Macgregor

said the patient at the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital developed forearm and elbow pain within days of receiving a games console for Christmas. The UK Body Action Campaign has launched a "prevention programme" to tackle the problem.

Body Action Campaign, 21 Nutwell Street, London, SW17 9RS. Tel: 0208 682 2154. email: bac@easynet.co.uk. web: www.just.dial.pipex.com/program.htm

**Young people:** The Health and Safety Executive has updated its health and safety guidance for bosses employing under-18s. The guidance details dangers to young workers and the laws protecting them. HSE figures show that last year six under-19s lost their lives carrying out work activities, 1,551 sustained major injuries and a further 5,310 youngsters

were off work for over three days as a result of a work-related illness or injury.

*Young people at work - a guide for employers.* Ref: HSG(G) 165 (rev). ISBN 0-7176-1889-7. £7.95. From HSE Books (see page 30).

**High school hazards:** A "Live safe! Work smart!" high school teaching resource, produced by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) with the help of teachers' unions, is now available on the web, on CD and as a looseleaf binder.

CCOHS, 250 Main Street East, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, L8N 1H6. email: clientservices@ccohs.ca web: www.ccohs.ca/curriculum

**US victims:** Workplace strain injuries affect about one million US workers each year, a new official report has found. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) re-

who in 1999 took her employers, Shell UK, to court and won, is a good illustration (*Hazards* 68). Claiming she was never shown how to use a computer mouse, she was awarded £25,000 damages for RSI she began to suffer when she was just 20 - two years after joining the firm.

In Holland it's a different story. A warning leaflet goes out with each computer, thanks to official funding.

"Computers are the key tools of the jobs of the future," says TUC's John Monks. "If we write off a generation of young people by making it difficult for them ever to get back to using a keyboard, we run the risk of writing off our economic tomorrow."

HSE figures throw up very starkly the glaring connection between worker disempowerment, stress and RSI. Research shows that for young people, lack of control over the work process is a third higher than for the average worker.

"Being unable to control the pace at which you work, the order of your tasks or the way you work, leads to high levels of stress - a key component of RSI," says Glen Bilby, a physiotherapist at Back2, a redesign and ergonomic specialist firm in London. His theory is that stress multiplies the problem of static posture, because the muscles automatically tighten up when you're stressed making your posture even more immobile. Referred pain, brought on by static posture, originates in the neck but is felt in the fingers, hand, wrist and forearm.

Across Europe, unions are calling for new legislation on RSI - either a new Directive, or amendments to the Manual Handling Directive.

The TUC has recognised RSI Awareness Day, on the last day of February, which is the only "non-repetitive" day in the calendar.

And to mark this year's Day, TUC general secretary John Monks has written to

the Chief Executives of key retailers of PCs in Britain, asking them whether they would be willing to issue a joint leaflet on display screen safety with trade unions to everyone buying a PC.

### International RSI Awareness Day 28 February 2001

The TUC is backing International RSI Awareness Day and is encouraging unions, safety reps and safety campaign groups to draw attention to strain injury problems at work.

Further details, TUC website: [www.hazards.org](http://www.hazards.org) (click on TUC). For international RSI news, go to [www.ctdm.org/rsiday](http://www.ctdm.org/rsiday) or contact the CTD Resource Network, 2013 Princeton Court, Los Banos, CA 93635, USA. [RSIDay-owner@yahoo.com](mailto:RSIDay-owner@yahoo.com)



port said a conservative estimate of the cost of these injuries was \$50m (£35m) a year.

*Musculoskeletal disorders and the workplace*. NAS, January 2001. web: [www.nationalacademies.org/](http://www.nationalacademies.org/)

**US victimisers:** A new US ergonomics standard, the product of a 10-year union campaign, introduced as one of the last acts of President Bill Clinton's presidency and which took effect on 16 January 2001 is already under attack from business. Many US business lobbyists have said their no.1 goal in the George W Bush administration is to either have the new president rescind the regulations or to have Congress overturn them.

OSHA ergonomics standard on the web: [www.osha-slc.gov](http://www.osha-slc.gov). Union factsheets and campaign materials can be found on the AFL-CIO (the US TUC) safety website at: [www.aflcio.org/safety/](http://www.aflcio.org/safety/)

**Big burden:** Work-related strains are becoming Europe's greatest health and safety challenge, the Bilbao-based European Agency has warned. It says strains account for 40 to 50 per cent of all work-related ill-health and affect over 40 million European workers, adding: "Europe's competitiveness is being considerably reduced by the social and economic impact of this work-related disorder."

European Agency factsheets: [www.agency.osha.eu.int](http://www.agency.osha.eu.int)

**Trouble at work:** The first website offering information and advice for working students, [www.troubleatwork.org.uk](http://www.troubleatwork.org.uk), has been launched by public union UNISON with the National Union of Students. The UK has one of the highest rates of working students in Europe, with the Office of National Statistics predicting that by 2006 over half of all under-20s in the labour force will be students.

## Adjust the job!

TUC says steps that union safety reps can take to protect young workers include:

1. Insisting on a workplace risk assessment.
2. Identifying any part of the job where the risk factors for RSI are present.
3. Checking whether the workplace could be adjusted to take more account of them as individuals.
4. Encouraging them to take advantage of any work breaks to give their body a chance to recover.
5. Help them to feel confident about taking screen breaks - without feeling they're malingering.
6. Persuading employers to rotate the work young people do, to create a bit of variety.
7. Carry out a body mapping session with the young workers (*Hazards* 61, 71), and act on the results, including entering any symptoms in the work accident book.

## Fast and furious

Work can be more of a pain when you are young...

Had to repeat the same sequence of movements many times

	% age 16-24	% total workforce
Men	74	64
Women	82	67
All	78	65

Had to work very fast

	% age 16-24	% total work workforce
Men	70	57
Women	72	62
All	71	60

Had to use appreciable force

	% age 16-24	% total work workforce
Men	46	35
Women	28	21
All	36	28

Not able to choose or change the order of their tasks or method of working

	% age 16-24	% total work workforce
Men	48	34
Women	38	32
All	43	33

Had to work in awkward or tiring positions

	16-24	Total
Men	54	46
Women	49	45
All	51	45

From *Self-reported working conditions in 1995: Results from a household survey*. HSE Books, 1997.