

# Work hoarse

**This winter there will be no seasonal cheer from some workers – their voices won't be up to it. Predictions of particularly harsh weather – and with it dry, heated rooms, colds and infections – could usher in a silent blight. Hazards editor Rory O'Neill warns occupational voice loss could affect record numbers of UK workers.**

When film star Julie Andrews announced this year that her over-worked vocal cords were permanently damaged and she would never sing again, it made international headlines. For millions of workers in the UK, their voices will not be their fortune, but they are their bread and butter, and voice loss could also spell the end of their careers.

About one-third of the workforce in modern economies relies on their voice to do their job, from teachers to trade unionists, call centre workers to check-out staff. And as the service sector continues to grow, the impact of "repetitive voice injury" on workers and the economy could be enormous.

A quarter of the workforce experiences daily voice problems, according to a 2001 US report. In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has no figures on the extent of occupational voice loss, but the US figures suggest over 5 million workers could be routinely affected by voice loss in the UK, at a cost of over £200 million each year.

One in five UK teachers had missed work due to voice problems in any one year, five times the rate for the workforce as a whole, a 1998 study found. But even for the non-teaching workforce, an occupational disease incidence rate of one in every 25 workers each year would put occupational voice loss near the top of the UK's workplace ill-health hit list.

#### What jobs are we talking about?

The range of workers potentially at risk of occupational voice loss includes:

- ◆ Teachers, lecturers, childcare workers
- ◆ Salespersons – shopworkers, sales staff, demonstrators, auctioneers, counter staff
- ◆ Barristers, preachers, politicians, trade unionists
- ◆ Staff sergeants and other NCOs
- ◆ Journalists, radio and television reporters
- ◆ Entertainers – singers, actors, performers, bingo callers
- ◆ Call centre workers
- ◆ Receptionists, advice line workers, counsellors, interviewers
- ◆ Aerobics and fitness instructors, coaches

#### No laughing matter

Early signs of a problem can be discomfort speaking, a lower pitch to the voice, breaking voice, a loss of vocal range, a tickling in the throat, or an urge to cough or clear the throat, or a voice that becomes harsh, raspy, shrill or thin.

If the symptoms persist overnight or over the weekend, this could be early signs of a long-term and potentially irreversible problem. Be vigilant for symptoms becoming more frequent or more troublesome.

In severe cases, vocal strain can produce inflammation of the larynx, swelling of the vocal cords or the appearance of vocal nodules, tumours or ulcers.

A lot of different medical terms might end up on your sicknote if your voice has been worked too hard. Commonly used terms are "aphonia", an inability to speak and "dysphonia", voice loss or hoarseness.

#### Dangerous talk

You might not be able to avoid talking at work, but you can avoid voice loss. It just involves avoiding risks.

**Overuse:** Voices aren't designed to talk continually without breaks, and cannot cope with prolonged heavy use.

**Noise:** We raise our voices causing vocal strain when the background noise level gets above 40dB, a fraction the occupational exposure limit, so the voice struggles even though the ears are fine.

**Humidity and temperature:** Low humidity, particularly prevalent in winter, is bad for the vocal cords and leads to an increased risk of throat infections.

**Stress:** Your throat is affected by stress – hence, the telltale "lump in the throat". In extreme cases can lead to "hysterical aphonia", stress-induced voice loss.

**Fatigue:** As the voice gets tired, it falls off, so extra effort is needed to make yourself heard, causing a damaging cycle of overuse.

**Infections:** Colds and flu must be taken seriously – a sore throat is a warning sign that the larynx is inflamed and needs a break.

**Air quality:** Mould spores in damp environments and airborne dusts like glass fibre, aluminium, wood dust, silica and lime can all cause irritation. "Hemp workers' laryngitis" is a recognised occupational disease. For teachers, chalk dust or marker fumes can cause problems.

**Chemicals:** Some common workplace exposures – chlorine, nitrogen oxides, organic solvents, bitumen fumes – can affect the voice.

**Work methods:** Power dialling systems, large classes, too much to say and too few breaks are among the management causes of voice loss.

**Strain injuries:** The use of speech recognition software as a response to RSI problems can switch the strain to the voice.

#### Hoarse for courses

College lecturer Donny Gluckstein, a union rep with Scottish teaching union EIS, lost his voice last year.

Filling in for absent colleagues and running an intensive course "made me hoarse to the point where even speaking gently was painful," he said. A visit to his GP confirmed he had "aphonia" due to work-related overuse.

Armed with a sicknote, he asked for "reasonable adjustments" to be made at work. "Being a union health and safety rep and health and safety lecturer and getting advice from the EIS health and safety official was very useful," he said.

Management responded positively. However, even with the aid of a radio mike, laptop and projector, his voice became too weak to speak. He continued teaching, silently, with the help of portable whiteboards and the laptop.



Donny's voice only started to improve when he finally got to see an ear, nose and throat specialist, who said instead of rest he needed exercise supervised by a speech therapist. He still uses the laptop and projector, has dropped intensive classes, and has his remaining classes spread over the week to avoid long periods of unbroken teaching.

And he wants to ensure others learn from his painful lesson. "Our safety committee discussed voice care and management is already liaising with other local further education colleges," he says. "One teacher training college even asked me for advice on how to get voice training up and running.

"So the lesson is – don't suffer in silence. There is a duty of care and a lot that can be done for the most valuable tool in the teacher's toolbox – their voice."

#### Getting the benefit

NUT member Patricia Clowry, a teacher for 19 years at a Newcastle-under-Lyme primary school, began to lose her voice when her class size was increased to 44. She needed three operations on her vocal cords and had to leave her job.

Mrs Clowry had kept a diary and recorded incidents when the classroom was particularly noisy. She related her voice "injury" to a series of "accidents" – particular days when she had to strain and suffered voice problems.

A Social Security Appeals Tribunal agreed she was entitled to compensation. It ruled "the appellant had suffered an accident or a series of accidents which would have occurred on a distinct occasion or occasions."

In order to get a government Industrial Injuries Benefit payout, Mrs Clowry had to prove the voice loss was the result of an "accident". The scheme only pays out for accidents or for an inclusive list of occupational diseases, which does not include voice loss.

Patricia Clowry, Social Security Appeals Tribunal, Ref. no. 4109502050, 12 April 1995.

#### Union wins £92,000 payout

Peter Hilton, a member of the rail union TSSA, worked for Regional Railways as a training instructor. He often had to lecture inside a depot while engines were running, contending with noise and diesel fumes from the engines.

After his voice became hoarse a consultant diagnosed chronic laryngitis. By this stage, Peter was often unable to work because of the state of his throat. Within two years he'd been forced to take ill-health retirement.

The TSSA legal team negotiated a £93,775 settlement with his employer. The Department of Social Security wanted to clawback £23,775, a move the union appealed successfully and Peter received over £92,000.



#### Voice your concerns

- ◆ Occupational voice loss can be a disabling condition – and is a management problem, not a personal problem.
- ◆ Don't assume it is not a problem in your workplace – has your employer carried out a "suitable and sufficient" risk assessment and have you undertaken bodymapping, risk mapping or a workplace survey?
- ◆ List cases of voice loss in the accident book – and make sure you raise any dangerous trends you spot.
- ◆ Negotiate maximum hours of voice-based work per day.
- ◆ Ensure your employer reduces the levels of background noise so you do not have to raise your voice to be heard.
- ◆ Take regular rest breaks and drink plenty of fresh water to lubricate your throat (caffeine and alcohol are drying agents).
- ◆ Negotiate working patterns that reduce stress levels – the Approved Code of Practice to the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations requires that employers "adapt work to the individual" including modifying working methods and designing out "monotonous work and work at a pre-determined rate."
- ◆ Ensure your employer provides a working environment which is at a comfortable temperature and humidity – Health and Safety (Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992.
- ◆ Ensure your employer has controlled dust and chemicals, as they can dry and inflame the mucous membranes of the vocal tract.
- ◆ Don't join the working wounded – overworking a throat that is already sore, through exertion, infection or cold or flu, can cause long-term damage.

[www.hazards.org/sickness](http://www.hazards.org/sickness) [www.hazards.org/tools](http://www.hazards.org/tools)