

Don't go breaking my heart

Stress at work greatly increases the risks of a fatal heart attack or stroke. And it's not the boardroom fat cats that are at greatest risk, leading US stress authority Paul Landsbergis tells *Hazards*. It's us poor grunts on the shopfloor.

Are the long work hours you're putting in or the pressure for production making you feel exhausted or "burned out"? Is the threat of layoffs due to restructuring, downsizing or outsourcing causing you anxiety or leading to sleeping problems? Is the understaffing in your workplace or your bullying boss causing a pain in your neck? (*Hazards* 69).

If yes, then you're experiencing the effects of job stress – and the symptoms aren't "all in your head," but are your body's way of telling you your job is out

of whack. And this stress – Britain's top workplace hazard according to TUC's 2002 safety reps' survey (*Hazards* 80) – can break your heart.

As a researcher on the Work Site Blood Pressure Study, I found that workers exposed to stress for at least half their working lives are 25 per cent more likely to die from a heart attack, while the odds of a fatal stroke increase by almost half.

This effect of cumulative exposure to job strain is larger than the estimated impact of aging 30 years or gaining 40lb in weight.

And it is blue collar workers, not executives, that are at greatest risk (*Hazards* 58). In our New York City study, for example, among men with lower status or blue-collar jobs, men with "job strain" had blood pressure

at work up to 11 mm Hg systolic and 6 mm Hg diastolic higher than men without "job strain."

However, among men with higher status or white collar jobs, the connection between "job strain" and blood pressure was much weaker, only up to 5 mm Hg systolic and 2 mm Hg diastolic.

Other studies have shown a link between heart disease and higher blood pressure and excessive overtime, as well as night shift or rotating shift work (*Hazards* 49).

Some occupations are particularly dodgy. For example, studies show inner city public transport workers have a high risk of heart disease and hypertension (high blood pressure).

A number of occupations at high risk for cardiovascular disease – bus and truck drivers, air traffic controllers, sea pilots – involve maintaining a high level of vigilance and alertness in order to avoid disaster (*Hazards* 28).

Studies have also shown excessive "job strain" – jobs which have a combination of

high psychological job demands or job pressures and low control, that is, a lack of influence on the job, or low job skills – is a strong predictor of future high blood pressure and heart disease.

Others have found that combining high job demands and efforts with low rewards – an "effort-reward imbalance" – is associated with future risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.

The good news is that none of this is inevitable – and unions can play an important role in reducing work stress among their members, through legislative action, bargaining, grievances, member education, and by health and safety committee activity.

By increasing job security and skills training, increasing employees' participation and influence over issues such as transfers and promotions, and by bargaining over working conditions, such as health and safety, bullying, and overtime, unions can help increase employees' job control and moderate job

Heartbreakers: Unfair bosses can drive up their employees' blood pressure, increasing their long-term risk of a heart attack or stroke. UK researchers carried out tests on 28 female healthcare assistants (HCAs), who were asked to score the interpersonal style of their supervisors, including whether their bosses encouraged discussion and whether they were perceived as unfair. Blood pressure readings rose in one group when it was working for a boss they considered to be unfair. There were only tiny changes in the blood pressure of the other group.

Nadia Wager and others. *The effect on ambulatory blood pressure of working under favourably and unfavourably perceived supervisors*, Occupational

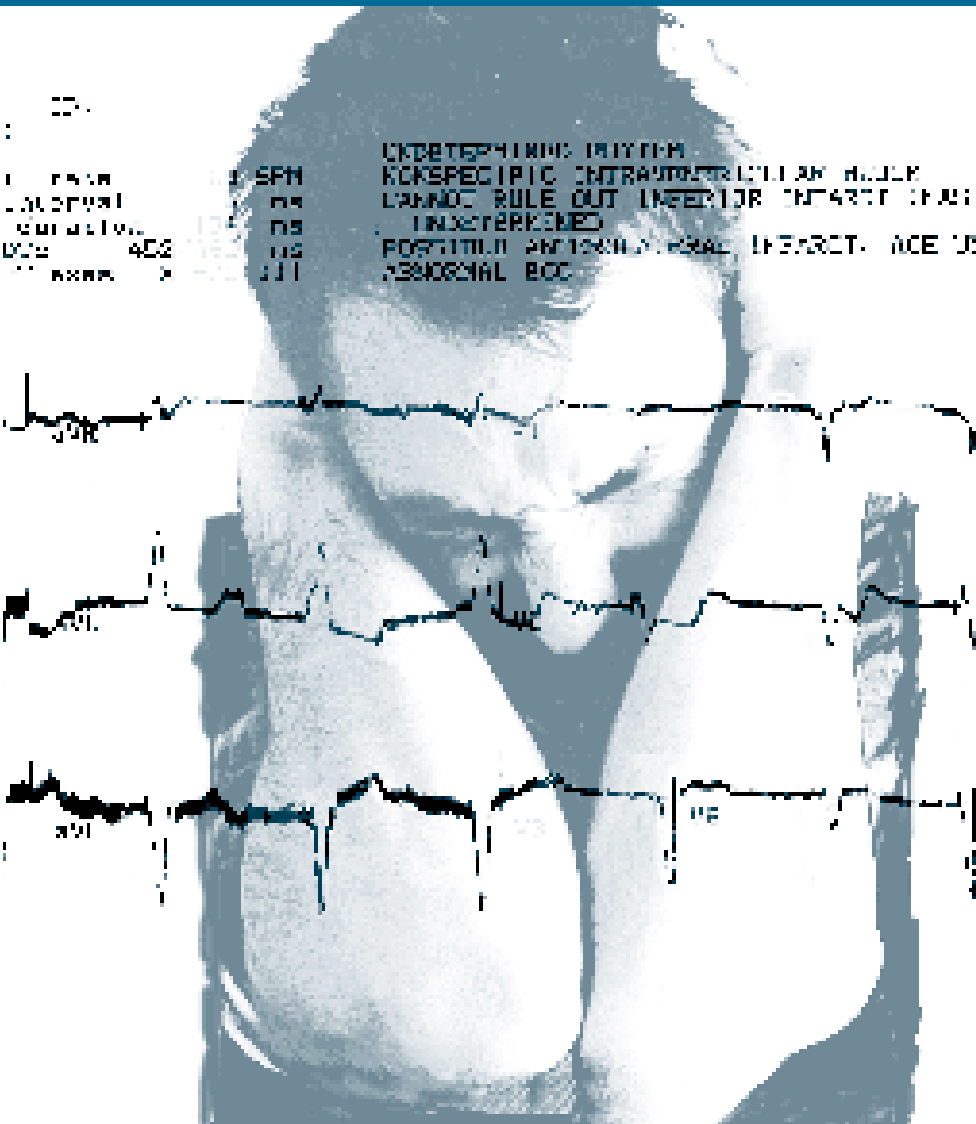
and Environmental Medicine, vol.60, pages 468-474, 2003.

Job slob: New stress research for the Samaritans has found Britain is smoking, drinking and slobbering out to cope with workplace stress. The May *Stressed Out* survey, conducted by MORI, found that the biggest cause of stress was jobs, followed by money, family and health. TUC's Owen Tudor commented: "Tackling stress is better than coping. Workers need to get together in a union to make sure their bosses behave better and prevent the risks of stress at source."

Stressed out: Civil service union PCS has said the Department of Work and Pen-

sions should not go ahead with a planned 20 per cent staff cut, because overloaded workers are at breaking point already. Its May survey found that more than four fifths (82 per cent) of DWP workers have suffered ill health, including stress, as a result of pressure of work. And nearly threequarters (72 per cent) have thought of resigning due to overwork and a lack of staff.

Cop this: Half of the police staff workforce do not feel valued by the police service and two-thirds say stress levels have increased, according to the first independent national survey of police staff. The survey, conducted by



New official HSE management standards for work stress

Employers will have to protect their staff from stress – or risk legal action, the Health and Safety Executive has warned.

HSE's *Management standards on work-related stress* says employers must support their employees and ensure they do not feel overly pressured in their roles.

The watchdog says positive feedback after a trial with 24 companies has prompted it to make the stress standards more widely available. It says the blueprint has been placed on HSE's website to encourage all sizes and all types of companies to have a go.

Firms will be expected to meet six guidelines to avoid stress:

- ◆ **Demands** – 85 per cent of employees say they can cope with the demands of the job;
- ◆ **Control** – 85 per cent consider they have an adequate say over how they do their work;
- ◆ **Support** – 85 per cent say they get adequate support from colleagues and superiors;
- ◆ **Relationships** – 65 per cent say they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviour such as bullying;
- ◆ **Role** – 65 per cent say they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- ◆ **Change** – 65 per cent say they are involved in organisational changes.

HSE believes the standards will make it easier for employees to bring actions against firms failing to act on stress, and will give its inspectors a benchmark against which to measure a company's performance on stress. The watchdog has never prosecuted an employer for exposing workers to preventable stress, but it has very occasionally taken other enforcement action on stress.

The management standards fall short of the official Approved Code of Practice on stress sought by unions (*Hazards 75*), and supported by the great majority responding to the HSE's 1999 *Managing stress at work* discussion document (*Hazards 71*).

Draft management standards on work-related stress: Pilot project. See the HSE stress page: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/stresspilot

demands – and thus reduce the harmful health effects of job strain.

◆ **Drop dead** - see the *Hazards* factsheet, pages 16-17

Paul Landsbergis is a researcher at the Department of Community and Preventive Medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York. Landsbergis P, Schnall P, Pickering T,

Warren K, Schwartz J. *Life course exposure to job strain and ambulatory blood pressure among men.* American Journal of Epidemiology, vol. 157 (11), pages 998-1006, 2003.

Landsbergis P, Schnall P, Pickering T, Warren K, Schwartz J. *Is the effect of job strain on blood pressure greater for men with lower socioeconomic status?* Scandinavian Journal of Work Environment and Health, vol. 29 (3), pages 206-215, 2003.

Landsbergis P. *The changing organization of work and the health and safety of working people: A commentary.* Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, vol. 45 (1), pages 61-72, 2003.

Schnall P, Belkic K, Landsbergis P, Baker, D. (2000). *The workplace and cardiovascular disease.* Occupational Medicine: State-of-the-Art Reviews, vol. 15. Philadelphia: Hanley and Belfus.

independent pollsters NOP for UNISON, also found that 76 per cent of members say workloads have increased; 66 per cent say stress levels are up; 49 per cent do not feel supported by their manager on workload pressures; and 37 per cent had experienced or witnessed racial harassment, homophobia or bullying.

Off track: A survey by rail union TSSA has revealed that 73 per cent of rail industry health and safety reps consider overwork or stress to be the No.1 workplace hazard. It found 46 per cent of respondents think long hours of work are the second biggest health and safety problem. TSSA general secretary Richard Rosser urged the industry to adopt the union's model stress policy, adding: "This includes identify-

ing causes of stress and conducting risk assessments to eliminate or control stress among employees."

Canackered: Long working hours and work overload are stressing out Canadians, an official study has found. Statistics Canada reports that in 2000, the highest proportion of working Canadians – more than one-third (34 per cent) – cited too many demands or hours as the most common source work stress, with 13 per cent citing risk of accident and injury as the top cause. A quarter of individuals who worked rotating shifts worried about the risk of accident or injury, compared with only 11 per cent of regular daytime workers.

Sources of workplace stress, Perspectives on labour and income, vol.4, no.6, June 2003