



The Global Occupational Health Network

Promoting and Protecting Health at the Workplace

Dear Reader,

This is the second issue of GOHNET that refers to the WHO Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health, which was endorsed by the World Health Assembly this year. The previous issues (number 13 - http://www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/newsletter/gohnet13_26nov07.pdf) referred to the first objective of the Global Plan, which is "To devise and implement policies on workers' health".

This issue of GOHNET relates to the second objective of the Plan, which states 'Promoting and Protecting Health at the Workplace'. We asked for input on practical country examples with reference to:

- assessment and management of health risks at the workplace
- development and enforcement of regulations and a basic set of occupational health standards
- building capacities for primary prevention of occupational hazards, diseases and injuries
- health promotion and prevention of chronic and communicable diseases.

We gathered input and examples from most WHO regions, which cover a variety of subjects from workplace health promotion in general to issues of primary prevention of occupational hazards, national registers, knowledge and education, ergonomics, and many more.

Consecutive GOHNET issues will deal with the remaining objectives of the WHO Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health, which are:

- to improve the performance of and access to occupational health services;
- to provide and communicate evidence for action and practice;
- to incorporate workers' health into other policies.

The Global Plan of Action can be accessed here: www.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA60/A60_R26-en.pdf

We would be pleased to learn about any examples on the improvement of performance of and access to occupational health services to be published in the next issue of GOHNET.

Enjoy your reading!

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Protecting and promoting health at the workplace



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Introduction

Despite the existence of effective interventions to prevent occupational diseases and injuries there are still major gaps in the health status of workers between and within countries. Therefore, the 60th

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The hidden cost of computing: most Irish organisations underestimate the cost of ergonomics in office environments



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Technology has had a profound effect on the way we live and work. As a result, we are spending more time sitting at desks and using computers, it has greatly increased the occurrence of related musculoskeletal disorders. Recruitment and retraining costs have increased significantly over the last decade. Skilled and experienced office personal need to be replaced due to occupational health related injuries. The average cost of replacing employees due to injury, long-term illness or early retirement is approximately €3,800-4,500 per employee (*Source: The RSI Association*).

According to a recent US survey, nearly 60% of office workers using a computer suffer from wrist pain while at the computer, and 51.2% say their keyboards are placed too high. But ergonomics are not the only problem: 49.7% percent of employees say they ignore recommendations to take breaks from their computers. (*Source: VHI website*)

Employers whose staff develop RSI conditions as a result of work face a range of costs, some evident, others hidden. These include:

- Loss of production
- Poor worker morale
- Sickness payments for those unable to work
- Ill-health retirement costs for those permanently unable to work
- Injury benefits payments in some industries
- Bad publicity
- Difficulties with recruitment due to a number of the above factors
- Litigation costs and compensation payments to those successfully pursuing negligence claims
- Increased insurance premiums
- In some cases, the total cost to an employer of an ill-managed RSI condition can be the equivalent of up to 50 percent of the employee's salary.

How can we improve our work practices? Experience shows, that adequate training in ergonomics can significantly reduce the risk of injury. However, what exactly is ergonomics? Office ergonomics applies science to workplace design to maximize productivity while reducing operator fatigue and discomfort. Many computer users have noticed the occasional aches and pains and discomforts that go hand in hand with spending long periods of time in front of the computer. Staring at a monitor for hours on end, year after year will most likely cause pains magnifying in frequency and severity. Already many computer users in Ireland experience discomfort when using the computer, which has become part of the daily routine. Research shows that these symptoms are especially noticeable when using a poor ergonomic setup in the office workplace. These symptoms can present a major problem in the ability to work effectively and healthily. Poor ergonomics in a computer environment can lead to permanent personal injury.

The most common occupational injuries for computer users in Ireland are computer related Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSIs), including conditions like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome and Tendonitis. Many of these cases would be easily preventable, but still occur due to ignorance of the symptoms or the severity of the injury. Ironically, repetitive strain injuries have been documented as far back as 1793. RSI is caused by making the same movement over and over again. For computer users RSI can result from poorly

designed workstations with monitor, keyboards placed too high, ill-fitting chairs, stressful conditions, extended hours of typing, and using a mouse. When spending long hours in front of the computer, the style of sitting, typing, pointing, and swiping, can affect more than the daily performance - it can influence long-term health.

The ILO Occupational Health Services Convention No. 161 and Recommendation No. 171 promote the advisory role of occupational health professionals in enterprise. Occupational health services should act as advisers on occupational health, hygiene and ergonomics. They should advise on the planning and organization of work, the design of workplaces, on the choice, maintenance and condition of machinery and other equipment, as well as on the substances and materials used in the enterprise.

A summary of what a company can do to promote a healthier work environment includes the following:

- Educate employers and supervisors and employees about the risks;
- Provide proper workstations and assistive devices;
- Schedule alternative work activities and frequent breaks for employees engaged in highly repetitive tasks; and
- Develop procedures to respond to employee concerns about RSI problems and integrate ergonomics into the company's total safety management.

Sensible introduction of ergonomic principles will help provide a healthy workplace for computer users as well as reduce and prevent the human and financial costs of computer-related health problems. Ergonomic program evaluation should not be seen as a one-time effort; it should be a continuous, on-going approach used to optimize the working environment. Olive Sheehan, Director of Occuhealth says "setting up your workstation properly may be the single easiest way to prevent injuries; we need to be aware of how the design and the arrangement of our equipment can impact our comfort, health, and productivity."

Injuries due to manual handling account for one in every three accidents reported to the Health and Safety Authority (H.S.A.) in Ireland. Although discussions indicate that Manual Handling awareness increased in recent years many employers are still unaware of the regulations. The Manual Handling of Loads Regulation place a requirement on the employer to avoid/reduce hazardous manual handling, conduct Manual Handling Risk Assessment, and to provide instruction and training.

Traditionally in Ireland there has been an over reliance on the provision of training in correct manual handling as the only means of reducing the risk of injury. For example a H.S.A. study carried out in 2001 found that 83% of workplaces did not conduct manual handling risk assessment where required. Although there are many case studies and indications that poorly arranged ergonomic settings in an office environment can affect the employee's health, many Irish companies are still unaware of the risks. In the year 2000 alone, over 10,000 compensation claims with regard to work related injuries and ill-health were lodged in Ireland at a cost of approximately 200 million Euros. The Irish Quarterly National Household Survey for 2000 found that over 1.1 million working days were lost due to work-related injuries and ill-health.

Clearly, the reduction of preventable workplace accidents is compatible with the profit-making motive of companies and the implementation of sound health and safety practices can deliver considerable savings to business. The employee's health is not put at risk. 'Health' and 'safety' in this context means the prevention of accidents and ill-health while at work. By implementing proper procedures management can eliminate or minimize risks to employees (H.S.A.). Compared to the USA, Canada and Australia, the awareness of Occupational health, training and the added benefits are still not realized in Europe. Many companies are not that attentive to the legal requirements (e.g. Health and Safety Regulations). However, experience shows that training, advice and guidance can prevent the consequences of a poorly designed workstation setup. It leads to a positive and safe work practice. Due to a general shift towards the use of technology over the past decades, injuries with machines have reduced. However manual

handling injuries still account for a large proportion of injuries recorded. Technology, while helping to reduce risks has given rise to its own hazards from working with visual display units (VDU) or computers for long periods of time. Poor ergonomics (badly designed workplaces or workstations) can cause physical injuries as can poor manual handling, slips, trips and falls. (Health & Safety Authority.). Employers should think not only terms of Euros but moreover in terms of their employees' health and welfare.

More research is required to investigate why companies are so reluctant to adopt policies and legislation. Our review showed that there are appropriate policies in place. We need to protect and promote health at the workplace. However, national and international action plans and strategies need to be enforced.



The National Register of radiofrequency workers



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Introduction

Public concerns over the health effects of exposure to radiofrequency (RF) radiation have been with us since the proliferation of mobile telephony and associated technology in the late 1990's. In response to these concerns, the British Government called on the head of, what is now, the Radiation Protection Division of the Health Protection Agency (HPA), to form the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP). Chaired by Sir William Stewart, now Chairman of the HPA, this group embarked on a broad programme of consultation across the UK and abroad. Meeting with scientists, network operators, broadcasters, pressure groups and members of the public they also assessed peer-reviewed literature and other scientific writings. After two years they produced their first report which concluded there was no evidence to suggest that exposures to radiofrequency (RF) radiation below the international guidelines cause adverse health effects.¹ However, it was acknowledged that there may be biological effects occurring at exposures below these guidelines, so a precautionary approach was adopted and the implications of this approach were reflected in the recommendations made by the group. One of these recommendations was that a register of occupationally exposed workers be established enabling a long-term follow-up study of cancer risks and mortality, amongst those occupationally exposed at relatively high levels. Ultimately, if adverse effects of exposure to RF radiation are identified, then the Health and Safety Executive of the UK (HSE) would establish a system of health surveillance of the affected groups.

The Establishment of the Register

In response to the recommendation of the IEGMP report the HSE established a Steering Group consisting of delegates from across the industrial sector that utilized transmitting antennas, as the recommendation was made in a report concerning mobile telephony. The Steering Group included representatives from the television and radio broadcasters, the Mobile Operators Association, the Ministry of Defence and the relevant trade unions.

At this stage it was decided that the database would be named the National Register of RF Workers and would be confined to those exposed to intentional emitters, i.e. those whose work brings them in close proximity to transmitting antennas on telecommunication, broadcasting masts and similar structures. Because of this the decision was taken not to include groups that use RF outside of this context, for example welding, induction heating or in health care. It was agreed that a decision would be made on extending the Register to include workers in these sectors after the Register in its initial form had been firmly established.