Hu-Tech Newsletter no. 24: March 2007

In our spring newsletter we present information on a study recently completed for HSE into manual handling injuries offshore. There's also an article on musculoskeletal risks for older female workers. For information, our Scottish office will be relocating on 14th March 2007 to:

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What causes manual handling injuries offshore?

The HSE has recently published research carried out by Hu-Tech on the root causes of offshore manual handling incidents. Forty case studies were prepared that show the underlying causes of incidents, which led to injuries affecting the back and upper limb. The most commonly found root causes were poor workplace design, poor equipment design and the use of inappropriate equipment. Examples included an operator standing on pipes to push a swinging object. When the object moved, he lost his footing and fell; the design of the workplace was clearly unsuitable for this task. As a remedial measure, the organisation decided to assign two operators to the task in future, and to build a scaffolding platform to provide a better footing. Other examples included storage areas being located far away from the point of use of equipment, or poor maintenance of handling equipment meaning operators carried out risky manual handling to get the job done.

In the incident reports we reviewed, we often found that it was recommended that remedial manual handling training be provided for the operators to prevent future incidents. However, training would not have rectified the poor design or use issues identified, and it is likely that injuries would continue to arise. With design emerging as an important factor, the report describes ergonomics and human factors issues to consider at each stage of the design process; a more satisfactory way of reducing the risk of incidents.

Although the study was prepared based on incidents in the offshore sector, the findings are likely to be of interest to any industry undertaking hazardous manual handling activities. The report can be found at http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr500.htm. If you would like further information on the study, you are welcome to contact Calum at calum.smith@hu-tech.co.uk.

Call by TUC for workers and children to learn keyboard skills

You may remember that we discussed the benefits of being able to touch type in our last newsletter. The recommendation is now gaining wider support; the TUC is calling on the government to help reduce the incidence of workplace Upper Limb Disorders (ULDs) by introducing typing and keyboard skills into schools. HSE figures show that in 2004/05 nearly 375,000 people suffered from a musculoskeletal disorder affecting the upper limbs or neck that was caused or made worse by their work. ULDs can be prevented if employers undertake a risk assessment and provide proper ergonomic equipment and working methods for staff, however most employers are not doing this, says the TUC. One of the causes of ULDs is the 'two-finger typing style' adopted by users without any proper keyboard training. Looking down at the keyboard for prolonged periods of time places a strain on the neck which can contribute to shoulder and upper limb discomfort. Being able to touch type allows you to adopt a good neck posture, and to move your hands in a relaxed way over the keyboard. In addition, touch typing can help reduce stress by making your typing quicker and more accurate.

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber said: 'Keyboard skills are not a statutory part of the National Curriculum, although individual schools can decide to introduce them. This life skill that could help protect the workforce of tomorrow from this painful and chronic illness. The government should introduce touch typing and keyboard skills into the National Curriculum as soon as possible.' However, it is not only children who will

benefit from being able to touch type; some workplaces encourage staff to lean by providing access to touch typing software. Although it is difficult to change engrained typing habits, a few weeks concentrated learning (e.g. 20 mins per day) should enable staff to master the skills. Please contact us if you want more information.

Ergonomics in the media

The Financial Times recently ran an article entitled 'Ergonomics: Hidden costs of the uncomfortable workplace' discussing the costs of not considering ergonomics in the design of the workplace; uncomfortable employees may be less productive and more likely to leave an employer. Andy Nicholson is quoted in the article, stressing the importance of educating employees on the use of adjustable furniture equipment, not simply providing the adjustments. The full article can be seen at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/866c890e-c587-11db-9fae-000b5df10621.html.

You may have seen the media reports that a reclined sitting position was good for the back, and suggesting that we should all be slouching when at work. In response to this, Margaret Hanson wrote an article which appears on the Ergonomics Society's website explaining why reclining is not ideal when at work. This can be seen at: http://www.ergonomics.org.uk/item.php?s=7&p=99&i=122.

Study Explores Benefits and Risks for Older Women Workers

A recent study has considered the health and wellbeing of older women in the British workforce, an area that has often been overlooked in occupational health research. Based on research into general health and gender issues in the workplace, it concludes that women can benefit from delaying retirement (e.g. through include financial self-sufficiency, self-esteem and mental health) but may experience more musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) as a result, especially those women in lower-status and more physically-demanding jobs.

There are 1.5 million female workers aged 45–64 and 113,000 over the age of 65 in the UK. Concentrated in certain areas of employment, women are more likely to work part time, be in low-status jobs and earn less than men. These factors influence the well-being of female workers particularly in later years. Poorly paid work that is demanding yet offers little control is the most stressful, and this can contribute to discomfort.

There is clear evidence that women are more likely than men to have MSDs, and that the incidence and sometimes the severity increase with age. Upper limb disorders including carpal tunnel syndrome, and back pain are the most common conditions. The causes for this are complex but it may be reflecting that 'light work' is often physically demanding. Women are also more likely than men to be engaged in work that requires repetitive tasks, while workstations may not be designed to meet their needs. Alongside these physical hazards in the workplace women may also face physical risks at home, such as lifting heavy children or moving adult dependants. There is potential for cumulative harm from a lifetime of these risk factors.

Based on this, it is clear that employers may need to pay particular attention to the ergonomic risks for older female workers, and consider their needs in particular during risk assessments.

"Older Women, Work and Health – Reviewing the Evidence," by Lesley Doyal and Sarah Payne, University of Bristol, was published by The European Agency for Health and Safety at Work.

Ergonomics Essentials and IOSH DSE Workstation Assessors courses: Dates for 2007

We are running the 5 day Ergonomics Essentials course on **21-25th May in Birmingham and 12-16th November in Birmingham (£925).**

Forthcoming dates for the very popular 2 day IOSH DSE Workstation Assessors' course are **8-9th May (Edinburgh), 18-19th September (London), 20-21st November (London)** (£490).

For further details please contact Lyn Bains: *lyn.bains@hu-tech.co.uk* or Tel: 01604 233 428.