

Musculoskeletal disorders receiving worldwide attention

By Trevor Schell
GUEST COLUMNIST

Ergonomics is the science of fitting the job to the worker. When there is a mismatch between the physical requirements of the job and the physical capacity of the worker musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) can result.

For example, workers who must repeat the same motion throughout their workday, who must do their work in an awkward position, who must use a great deal of force to perform their jobs, who must repeatedly lift heavy objects or who face a combination of these risk factors are most likely to develop MSDs.

Prolonged exposure to ergonomic risk factors, particularly in combination or at high levels, is likely to cause or contribute to an MSD or aggravate the severity of a pre-existing MSD. The longer and more often the exposure to ergonomic risk factors, the longer the time needed to recover.

MSDs are injuries and disorders of the muscles, nerves, tendons, ligaments, joints, cartilage and spinal discs. They do not include injuries resulting from slips, trips, falls or similar accidents.

Examples of MSDs include carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, sciatica, herniated disc and low back pain and account for more than 1/3 of all occupational injuries and illnesses that are serious enough to result in days away from work.

These injuries are receiving worldwide attention, and have prompted some significant legislation and guidelines to address these concerns.

All member states of the European Common Market have ergonomics legislation, as do Australia and the Scandinavian countries. Here in Canada, two provinces have ergonomic legislation in place, British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

In the industrial heartland (Ontario), the government legislates requirements for returning injured workers while not enacting legislation aimed at reducing, or avoiding the injuries in the first place which appears counteractive.

Many improvements are being made on a daily basis in workplaces throughout the country.

However, without the benefit of enforceable legislation many workers will continue to suffer

the effects of back injuries and repetitive strain injuries, which in turn impact the cost carried by employers for WSIB premiums, of health care, and increases the burden on taxpayers.

A recent report suggests the federal government is looking at amending Part 2 of the Canada Labour Code, which covers occupational health and safety, allowing the development of ergonomic standards and regulations.

Within the Occupational Health and Safety Act there is no mention of ergonomics. Typically any issue pertaining to ergonomics is placed under the general duty clause in the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Section 25(2)(h) states:

"An employer shall take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker."

So why is there an increase in the number of MSD's? Is it from increased recognition of the problems, political pressure, or the fact that technology is changing so quickly each day while the evolutionary process for humans to evolve is so slow?

Perhaps it is all of those reasons.

The enactment of the Occupational Health and Safety Act here in Ontario came into play largely through the actions of many people in Northern Ontario.

That is something we all should be proud of, but the battle is not over. The Act does not account for ergonomic issues and we need to follow what British Columbia and Saskatchewan have started as well.

Many of the Northern Ontario advocates who fought for the Act are no longer with us or have since retired.

We as the next generation need to recognize that the battle is not yet over and to continue their fight.

So why not let the next step in Occupational Health and Safety come from the place where it started, Northern Ontario.

- **Trevor Schell is an ergonomist with the Occupational Health Clinic (Sudbury). If you have an occupational health topic you would like addressed on a future column, contact the OHCOW at 523-2330.**