

# TOUCH OF TROUBLE

OOS is more about information, awareness and behavioural change than about ergonomics, and successful prevention requires the involvement of employers and employees, says Maurice van Liempd.

The electronic age promised 'everything at the touch of a button' and, these days, many of us spend much of the day busily clicking away at keypads and button-operated controllers. What was not foreseen, however, was that even the lightest of touches, when repeated often enough, could become a burden which can break our bodies down.

According to the Department of Labour's *OOS Guide*, the incidence of OOS is believed to be much higher than reports indicate. In fact OOS and other so-called musculoskeletal disorders are among the most common medical problems nowadays. It is difficult to assess accurately the cost of OOS to New Zealand, but ACC says claim numbers and the cost of claims for OOS conditions are increasing.

Successful OOS prevention requires the involvement of both employers and employees. The latter are most able to do the best for themselves when management takes the lead. The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 sets out the key responsibilities employers have in preventing injuries at work and managing any cases that do arise. In summary, to prevent harm employers need to:

- Take all practicable steps to ensure the safety of employees while at work;
- Identify, assess and control risk factors by eliminating, isolating or minimising them;
- Monitor staff exposure to any significant risk factors that have been minimised and their health in relation to them;
- Provide information, training and supervision.

The Dutch IT firm Interpay, where most people do intensive computer work, has implemented a successful policy in dealing with OOS based on these principles. Its Health & Safety policy puts great emphasis on preventing computer-related diseases like RSI. Employees are informed about the RSI prevention policy through a policy document, brochures on healthy working and

information pages on the company intranet. Management is responsible for implementation of the policy which incorporates:

- Creating RSI awareness through good information supply;
- Behavioural change;
- Well equipped work environments;
- Work posture awareness;
- More diversity in tasks;
- Taking more (mini) breaks, doing stretches or short work-outs (eg. with an exercise product like Powerball which builds arm and wrist strength);
- Direct response to health complaints through advice and treatment;
- Better physical fitness and stimulating exercise;
- Stress management.

Employees who work on keyboards are requested to take a 10-minute break every hour (the legal requirement is every two hours) and to work no more than four hours a day on data entry. This is prompted with software, which keeps track of typing behaviour and gives pop-up warnings at times when a break is needed. A company physiotherapist gives trainings and education. Management is more involved in following drop-outs due to sickness.

OOS prevention measures are about more than just ergonomics. Information, awareness and behavioural change are an indispensable part of a successful policy. The key is to be pro-active and address health issues before they become critical.

Occupational overuse syndrome is a preventable condition and effective prevention requires that employers take OOS seriously, both in the interests of good management and for the health, safety and welfare of their employees.

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