

MSDs: action-oriented research helps unions to break the silence

Tens of millions of European workers suffer from musculoskeletal disorders – an “epidemic” that politicians and social partners alike have done too little about. Will the answers come from the shopfloor? Over 300 members of a Belgian trade union have taken part in an “action-oriented research” project, and the initiative is spreading.

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Faster work paces, psychological pressure, tight deadlines, etc. are making the “epidemic of MSDs” worse.

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"Many colleagues are packing in work at 58 because they are worn-out and can't go on any longer", Anne-Marie Brogniez told a score of workers and officials from a branch of Belgium's national FGTB trade union federation. The union steward for the Mestdagh-Champion supermarket group knows all about the problem of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) from surveys done in the past in her firm, particularly among butchers and lift truck operators, two jobs particularly hard hit by these diseases. But the reason she was coming back to it on a summer's day in 2009 was for a still more far-reaching project intended to involve all staff in her supermarket and other group outlets - nearly 200 people in all. Union stewards from two other firms, Laurenty contract cleaners, and the Lepage industrial maintenance firm, were also present.

The three firms had answered the call put out by the FGTB some months earlier on 28 April 2009, bringing together hundreds of activists for a World Day for Safety and Health at Work with MSDs as the keynote theme.

And with good reason, for this vast family of inflammatory and degenerative diseases of the musculoskeletal system affects all sectors and all categories of workers. The foremost Europe-wide occupational health survey - the last of which dates from 2005 - found a quarter of European workers reporting back pain, while 23% experienced muscle pain in the shoulders, neck and upper and lower limbs.¹ MSDs are by far the most common work-related health problem in Europe.²

86% of workers affected

The usual preliminary to any prevention strategy is to make the problem more visible. And that was the guiding principle of the "action-oriented research" coordinated by the FGTB in Charleroi, an industrial city in western Belgium. The project is based on what is known in scientific circles as the "Nordic Musculoskeletal Questionnaire"³, which asks specific questions like "Have you at any time during the last 12 months had trouble such as ache, pain, discomfort, numbness in the neck, knee/leg, wrist?", and also asks workers to rate the pain felt on a scale of 0-10.

The survey reveals a marked gender difference with regard to medical advice: women more readily go to the doctor and more often follow medical treatment than men.

The FGTB had the replies processed by the Centre de défense et d'action pour la santé des travailleurs (CDAST), an association that provides support and advocacy for workers affected by a work-related injury or disease. A total of 343 workers - 201 women and 142 men - completed the questionnaire.

86% of the workers reported experiencing musculoskeletal pain or discomfort in the previous 12 months, and 72% during the seven days before taking part in the survey. For 71% of the workers affected, lower back pain is far and away the most common type of MSD in the three companies (see Figure 1, p. 34). It was also the site of the most intense pain which those suffering it rated at 4.5 out of 10, or twice as intense as that experienced by those complaining of upper back, neck and knee/leg pains (see Figure 2).

The workers were also asked questions about seeking medical help: 43% reported having seen a doctor about musculoskeletal complaints during the 12 months preceding the survey, 45% reported having received treatment and 22% said they had been off work.

"The differences found in the site and intensity of reported complaints cannot be put down to gender," argues the report's author, Dr. Jilali Laaouej. "Looking at the findings for workers in gender-mixed jobs like the butchery department in Mestdagh stores, for example, the differences are close to nil", says the CDAST expert. One difference, however, is that women complain significantly more than men of upper limb pain, which Dr. Laaouej argues is mainly due to gender size difference - stockier workers complain less of pain in the upper limbs than slither ones.

1. *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey (2005)*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.

2. According to Eurostat figures, MSDs account for 50% of recognized occupational diseases in the European Union. European Occupational Diseases Statistics (EODS), 2000.

3. Developed in 1987 by Scandinavian experts, the questionnaire consists of closed questions and can be self-administered or used in an interview. The questionnaire was created to answer the question: "Does a musculoskeletal disorder exist in the given population and, if so, what area of the body does it affect?" The questionnaire includes a back view diagram of the human body divided into nine anatomical regions.

Figure 1 Percentage of workers reporting at least one complaint

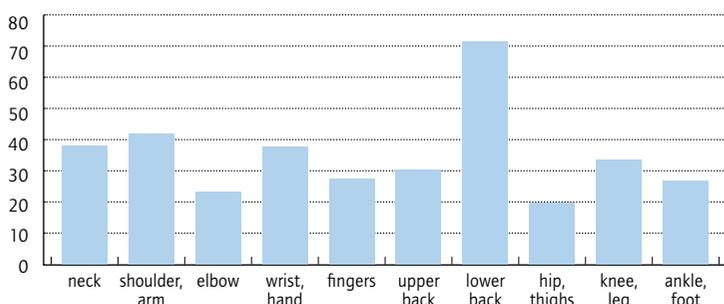


Figure 2 Intensity of pain by site

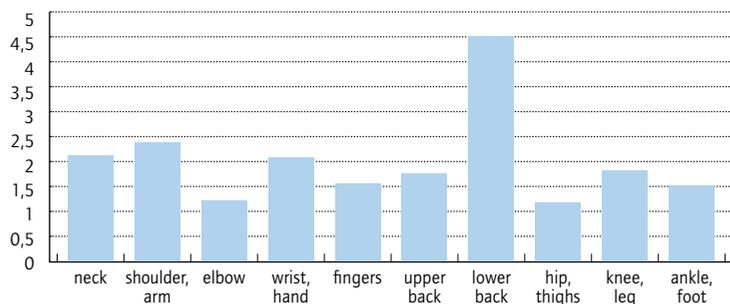
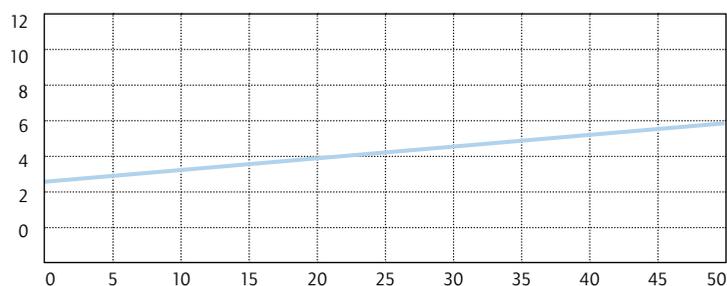


Figure 3 Link between length of service in the same job and intensity of pain



Source of figures 1, 2, 3:
Action-oriented research in
the Charleroi region, musculo-
skeletal disorders, FGTB CDAST

By contrast, the survey does reveal a marked gender difference with regard to medical advice: women more readily go to the doctor and more often follow medical treatment than men. However, there is no evidence of them taking more time off sick than their male colleagues.

The burden of work organization

Work organization factors seem to be clearly implicated in MSDs: workers with variable working hours (rotating or split shifts) report significantly more painful complaints than workers on fixed working hours. Likewise, average perceived pain rises with the length of the working week. This is no more surprising than is the observed relationship between pain intensity and length of service whether in the job, firm or total career (see Figure 3).

The idea is to get the workers to take ownership of the problem as a whole. Has it worked? At a feedback meeting with the Mestdagh and Laurenty shop stewards in February 2010, the initial feeling was "up to a point". On the good side: all but the odd one or two workers agreed to answer the questionnaire. "Once we assured them that the questionnaire wasn't going to end up in the employer's hands, they were OK with it. In fact they came out with: "it's good that someone's talking about our line of work at last", observed Catherine Mathy, a union steward at Laurenty cleaning contractors. On the down side: while some hope that the survey findings might prompt their employers to look again at how they organize their work, most of the participants are under no illusions, and some would seemingly even rather leave things as they are than see changes brought in, putatively to make their job easier.

"Even improvements are a worrying thing at Laurenty. We have appropriate equipment that should make our job easier. But the problem is that the firm links well-being at work to profitability. So every time a new cleaning cart appears you know it'll mean layoffs because there will be fewer hours to work. We get a new eight-wedge microfibre cleaning cloth. Great, doesn't need to be wrung out every time. But as you won't be losing time going to the bucket to wring it out, you get half an hour less to clean the same area," complained the union rep.

One outcome the union does see as positive is that the workers involved in the research make the direct link between their physical aches and pains, and their job. But showing up the impact of work organization does not necessarily translate into action. Most workers seem resigned. They have accepted the idea that it comes with the job in this industry.

"The problem is that the firm links well-being at work to profitability."

"The youngsters they hire see no likelihood of change because that's how life is, it's about productivity. As a service company, we just reflect what the customer pays the company. If the customer pays peanuts, then you're obviously going to have to rush the job. Contracts are very short-term, too, and if we don't get it, someone else will because customers come and go in the cleaning business. We know what we're in for now and when the next turnover happens, when the bids go in, we know that the prices will automatically be lower and there will be even more work to be done", rues Catherine Mathy.

Carlo Briscolini, the FGTB's project coordinator on this, believes that moving from the findings to preventive action in the company depends on the strength of the CPPT (health and safety committee), the consultative body where employer and employee representatives thrash out issues affecting health and safety at the workplace.

"A new page is turning in the three firms that took part in the project. Now we need their CPPTs to come up with practical solutions to the problems shown up by the survey", argues the union official. Recognizing the limitations of a mainly regional initiative, the FGTB plans to launch a nation-wide survey on MSDs in the cleaning sector. The union also hopes to repeat the scheme in mainly white collar firms, because MSDs also affect knowledge workers (see box).

The union believes that increasing this kind of "action-oriented research" can also help bring home to policy makers and the establishment the scale of a problem they are pretending does not exist. ●

A worker's tale

White collar workers suffer too

In late May 2009, the French CGT union's Federation of Education, Research and Culture workers launched a campaign against MSDs, which are also prevalent among knowledge workers, as the following personal testimony reveals.

Vinca Hyolle is a specialized stack attendant in the book legal deposit department of France's national library, the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.

"We get huge parcels in that you have to lift off the book trucks, open them up, sort the books, which can weigh up to several kilograms. You have to do a search to make sure that the work hasn't already been registered, then you have to accession it and assign it an inventory number, then put it on a book truck, which means making a turning motion. We work on computers and use a mouse, which results in spinal problems because we don't have appropriate furniture. We work at a table that isn't a desk, so you can't sit with your legs under it. So I have to work at a distance from my keyboard and screen. Computer work needs relative quiet, but there are a dozen of us in the same room, so there is obviously noise going on, especially when opening parcels. We spend two half-working-days a week on opening, which is when we take the parcels, open them and put them on book trucks for taking to other colleagues who spend their entire day - exactly 7 hours 12 minutes - on nothing but accessioning. So, there isn't much variety in the work.

Our job has changed a lot with computerization. Before, stack attendants just did manual work like opening parcels and sorting the books. Now, they also have to be able to use computers and management systems, and know the national library catalogue inside out. Our jobs have become more complex and at the same time we are being asked to meet higher performance targets. We have recently been set accessioning quotas that take no account of time spent hunting information on materials that are hard to classify. When the work used to be done at a more relaxed pace, there were fewer mistakes.

You do feel stressed because you absolutely have to meet the targets set. For example, a cataloguer has to accession 25 books a day. But for some books, this means inputting all the information related to the bibliographical description like particulars of the author, type of edition, etc. This is pretty time-consuming and knowledge-intensive work. You have second readers who are responsible for checking the quality of accessioning. These are often recent graduates fresh out of their competitive exam, who come in and start lecturing their more experienced colleagues who are making mistakes because of stress. This has created tension in the office, the atmosphere has gone downhill, we don't celebrate people's birthdays any more. We used to do quality work that was seen as a benchmark in all libraries in France and even abroad. That reputation is under threat because there's some question of part of our cataloguing work being farmed out to private contractors."