



... from the Guest Editor



STEFANUS SNYMAN

Ramazzeni identified work-related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) as far back as 1713 as serious diseases caused by 'violent and irregular motions and unnatural postures of the body'. He cited scribes and clerks as experiencing 'intense fatigue of the hand and the whole arm because of the continuous strain of the muscles and tendons'. This condition was similarly recognised in the 19th century among artists, musicians, seamstresses, milkmaids and smiths. More recently, popular terms have been used, e.g. telegraphist's cramp, hop picker's gout, fisherwoman's finger, upholsterer's hand, gamekeeper's thumb, cotton-twister's hand, tennis elbow and pizza-cutter's wrist¹.

DEFINITION

Circular Instruction 180 concerning compensation WRULDs in terms of the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) prefers the umbrella term work-related upper limb disorders, instead of terms such as overuse syndrome, repetitive strain injury (RSI) and cumulative trauma disorder (CTD)².

This Circular Instruction describes WRULDs as a collective term for a group of occupational diseases that comprise musculo-skeletal disorders caused by exposure in the workplace affecting the muscles, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, joints and bursae of the hand, wrist, arm and shoulder. These are syndromes associated with characteristic symptoms and physical signs (e.g. rotator cuff syndrome, epicondylitis at the elbow, tenosynovitis and nerve entrapments such as carpal tunnel syndrome).

IMPACT OF WRULDs

No comprehensive data is available for South Africa regarding the impact of WRULDs on healthcare and the economy. However, internationally WRULDs are having an alarming impact, causing significant occupational health problems.

The USA Bureau of Statistics reported that among major disabling injuries and illnesses, the average days away from work were highest for carpal tunnel syndrome (27 days). Among the leading events and exposures, repetitive motion such as grasping tools, lifting bricks and typing, resulted in the longest absences from work – an

average of 17 days. Conservative estimates calculate the cost of work-related musculo-skeletal disorders in the USA at between \$13 and \$20 billion annually³.

In Nordic countries and the Netherlands the cost has been estimated at between 0,5% and 2% of Gross National Product⁴ and in Britain approximated cost is £1,25 billion per year⁵.

The incidence of WRULDs in South Africa is very likely to be substantially higher than that reported for the USA and Europe, due to excessive physical demands placed on employees in industrially developing countries. The newly established Ergonomics Unit at the National Institute for Occupational Health, among others, are doing very encouraging research on WRULDs in the South African context, having for example, a laboratory which is equipped with state-of-the-art machines to diagnose hand-arm vibration syndrome (HAVS). (See Busisiwe Nyantumbu and Spo Kgalamono on HAVS in this issue).

IN THIS ISSUE....

Current legislation – breakthroughs and obstacles

Until recently it was almost a futile exercise to submit cases of WRULDs to the Compensation Fund. The gazettement of the amended Schedule 3 (COIDA)⁶ and Circular Instruction 180 were major breakthroughs enabling the Compensation Fund to use clear guidelines to adjudicate on WRULDs. In her contribution, Annamaré van der Merwe of the Compensation Fund gives an overview of this Circular Instruction.

A remaining obstacle in legislation is the lack of ergonomic regulations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Tjakie Naude and myself review current legislation (and shortcomings), with special reference to computer users. Hopefully this effort will encourage the Department of Labour to address the need for proper ergonomic regulations.

MANAGING WRULDs

Another challenge is to equip health practitioners, employers and organised labour to understand and effectively manage employees with WRULDs. The Compensation Commissioner's Guidelines for Health

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The publisher wishes to advise that the September/October 2005 issue, which coincides with the International Occupational Hygiene Association's 6th International Scientific Conference, IOHA 2005, will be posted on 7 September, 2005.

Practitioners & Employers to Manage Work-Related Upper Limb Disorders is of great assistance in addressing this challenge⁷. Readers are encouraged to download these guidelines at www.sasom.org.za or www.labour.gov.za

The importance of referring employees to adequately trained and experienced health professionals when a WRULD is suspected, demands emphasis. These include occupational medicine practitioners, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, ergonomists, and orthopaedic specialists, amongst others.

Adriaan van Zyl emphasises the importance of a pan-disciplinary approach in managing WRULDs in this edition and the pivotal role of occupational health practitioners to coordinate such efforts. Lindsay Scott and Lize Slabbert focus on the holistic approach of physiotherapists and occupational therapists in managing WRULDs. Stadler Kirsten provides a practical approach to work-related shoulder conditions.

In conclusion we trust that readers will find this edition of value in assisting employees with WRULDs to receive appropriate treatment and rehabilitation. Also that employers and organised labour will be motivated to take pro-active measures embracing ergonomic strategies to reduce the risk of WRULDs in the workplace.

REFERENCES

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The National Asthma Education Programme invite you to

Asthma for Africa Congress 2005

From Science to Control

Dates:

26-27 November 2005

Venue:

The Linder Auditorium, University of the Witwatersrand

CPD:

CPD accreditation pending (10 Clinical & 2 Ethics Points)

Please join us for our bi-annual Congress. This year we wish to provide a review of our asthma knowledge ('From Science to Control') and make this applicable to patient care. We have invited the cream of South Africa's Asthma Community to share their knowledge with us. Please diarise these dates. Further information will be forthcoming.

We look forward to seeing you in Johannesburg in November!

Further details available from robgreen@global.co.za

