



Panel seeks strategies to reduce RSIs in Ontario

By Vanessa Mariga

The Ontario government has struck a panel of employer and labour groups to collaborate and brainstorm ways to reduce the growing problem of work-related repetitive strain injuries (RSIs).

The panel is part of the government's plan to reduce workplace injuries by 20 per cent by 2008, labour minister Chris Bentley announced earlier this year.

"In 2003, there were over 40,000 musculoskeletal injuries to workers, largely due to overexertion or ergonomic problems," Bentley said in a Ministry of Labour statement. "That's over 40 per cent of all workplace lost-time injuries."

The panel held its first meeting in March and plans to report back to the minister in seven months with strategies on how to reduce ergonomic injuries in Ontario's manufacturing sector. Cathy Walker, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) national director of health and safety, also sits on the panel and explains that RSI rates soar within the manufacturing sector because workers are typically under the gun in these industries.

"A lot of the work is quite repetitive and there's companies that put more pressure on workers to produce harder and faster. They [the workers] simply can't keep up," she contends.

According to Statistics Canada, one out of every 10 Canadians between 2000 and 2001 had an RSI serious enough to limit their activity, with work-related activities cited as the most common cause — specifically within the manufacturing, processing, and transport or equipment operating sectors.

While the CAW has bargained ergonomic provisions into its collective agreements, Walker says she'd like to see micro breaks allowed for assembly line workers.

Dr. Donald Cole, a senior scientist at the Institute for Work and Health and an associate professor at the University of Toronto's department of epidemiology and community medicine, agrees with Walker that micro breaks are a good idea. "But the quality of our evidence to demonstrate improvement or reduction in risk isn't as good as we would like it to be," he cautions. "So I wouldn't guaran-

tee that if you institute micro breaks you would get rid of your RSI problem — it's only part of what should be done."

John Macnamara, a panelist and the general manager of health and safety at Dofasco, says that within his company physical-demand analysis is used to identify and assess work that may be posing a problem, as well as matching individual's capabilities to work. He says Dofasco has benefited from this strategy and notes that the panel will also be embarking on a similar process over the next seven months.

"The purpose of the panel is primarily to identify best practices so that we can share, or make recommendations so that hopefully it will get shared all across the province," he says.

Vanessa Mariga is editorial assistant of OHS CANADA.

Drowsy drivers least alert during the day: study

By Trisha Richards

Swerving over lanes and missing stop signs in mid-afternoon may not be evidence that a motorist is intoxicated or in a fit of road rage. The driver might just be having a little siesta.

Approximately 4.1 million Canadian drivers admit they have fallen asleep at the wheel, according to results from a public opinion survey by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF). "The Road Safety Monitor: Drowsy Driving Report," which was conducted by telephone to 1,209 drivers, found the afternoon to be one of the most common times to doze off on the road.

This time is called the "afternoon dip" or the "post-lunch dip," says Dr. Jeffrey Lipsitz, medical director of the Sleep Disorders Centre of Metropolitan Toronto. "And, this

lunch dip in our alertness actually has nothing to do with whether you had lunch or not." People are biologically programmed to be tired at that time of day, he explains, and in some cultures, it is also known as siesta time.

Employees who work shifts or drive through the night are more likely to be sleepy at the 4 am to 6 am time period, he adds. "In fact, that's the time when we see the greatest number of fatigue-related crashes in relationship to the number of vehicles on the road." And it also happens to be just before rush hour.

Dr. Doug Beirness, vice-president of research for TIRF and lead author of the report, says he was surprised by the findings because, according to official crash rates, only one to two per cent of crashes have falling asleep as a casual or contributing factor to the crash. "Yet, our survey indicates one in five admit to nodding off," he explains. Possibly even more surprising is that 57 per cent of

