

## MSDs in Europe : evolution of the debate

In the context of the European trade union campaign led by the ETUC and the TUTB to raise awareness on MSDs we have produced and published several works including a Special Report on MSDs in Europe in our Newsletter of June 1999 and a poster presenting the main points of our campaign.

In the present article we review current developments in the debate that is continuing at the European level and some national activities which have been organised in the context of the European Week on MSD prevention. After that, we review the activities which the TUTB is carrying out within the framework of the trade union campaign.

See also our special MSD page on our website : <http://www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/msd.html>

The fact that musculoskeletal disorders have been recognised and taken into account by the European institutions is the result of sustained trade union activities and negotiations<sup>1</sup>. The Advisory Committee in Luxembourg set up a working group and the Agency in Bilbao has chosen MSD as the topic of the European Seminar 2000. The reasons for which the trade unions attach such importance to MSDs are threefold. First, MSD incidence is very closely related to work organisation and work rhythm as well as to pay systems, which have been the subject of many struggles for decades. There are several types of MSDs which are not yet sufficiently covered by legislation. The risks of upper limb disorders are scarcely mentioned in the framework Directive, although it is well-known that their aetiology is multi-factorial, ranging from physical to organisational factors at the workplace. And thirdly, "alternative" employment contracts such as temporary and part-time employment contracts and sub-contracting are being used more and more and the pace of work is expected to intensify in the years that lie ahead. All of these factors are leading to a mental and physical overload for workers.

The MSD debate is continuing at several levels: the European Agency in Bilbao, the Advisory Committee in Luxembourg, the European Standardisation Committee and various groups of experts.

Several seminars bringing together groups of European experts have been organised in the context of the European Week. TUTB has contributed to 2 of these events.

### A Swedish seminar

The Swedish National Institute for Working Life held a "workshop on normative actions concerning work-related musculoskeletal disorders" in Brussels from 2 to 4 May in the context of the "Work Life 2000" project. This seminar was part of the preparatory work for the "WorkLife 2000" conference which is due to be held in Sweden from 22 to 25 January 2001

within the framework of the Swedish Presidency of the European Council. It provided an opportunity for exchanging international and European expertise with a view to defining proposals for the measures to be taken to prevent MSDs.

### A Dutch seminar

The Dutch Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs held a "European seminar on work-related upper limb disorders" in The Hague on 30 May with a view to debating the course of action to be followed to deal with the problem of upper limb disorders at the European level. This seminar was a follow-up to the collection of information on repetitive strain disorders<sup>2</sup> carried out by the Agency in Bilbao at the request of the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs.

The experts invited to these 2 events - mainly researchers and policy-makers - were from all European countries as well as other continents. The conclusions reached at these 2 seminars were fairly similar: all participants agreed on the magnitude of the MSD problem both in Europe and at the international level, on the fact that risks are tending to increase, on the need to develop harmonised methods for assessing MSD risks and diagnosing related illnesses. However, no consensus was reached as regards developing new regulations in this field. The suggestions put forward focused on voluntary action and a range of preventive measures to be taken by firms and on the strategies of the Member States. The term "deregulation" was often mentioned. Instead of European strategies, the proposals put forward focused more on national measures with quantitative objectives as well as on agreements between the social partners.

### Ergonomics and machine design

Progress is slow in the debate on technical standardisation - the integration of ergonomics and MSD prevention principles into the designing of machinery.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Musculoskeletal Disorders in Europe : unions show a lead" by Giulio Andrea Tozzi in our Special Report : MSDs in Europe, *TUTB Newsletter* no. 11-12, June 1999, pp. 12-21.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Repetitive strain injuries in the Member States of the European Union: the results of an information request*, European Agency for Health and Safety at Work, 2000.

Working group 4 (of CEN/TC 122) on Biomechanics is currently assigned the task of drawing up the standards on machinery-related MSD risks as a mandate under the Machinery Directive. Several draft standards are currently under elaboration: prEN1005 Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 concerning the terms and definitions of human physical performance, manual handling of objects connected with machinery, force limits, and the evaluation of working postures respectively.

Main projects for European standards covering MSDs within the framework of the Directive on machinery :

- PrEN 1005-1 : Safety of machinery - Human physical performance - Part 1 : Terms and definitions
- PrEN 1005-2 : Part 2 : Manual handling of objects associated to machinery
- PrEN 1005-3 : Part 3 : Recommended force limits for machinery operation
- PrEN 1005-4 : Part 4 : Evaluation of working postures in relation to machinery
- PrEN 1005-5 : Part 5 : Risk assessment for repetitive handling at high frequency

are expected by the end of August<sup>3</sup>. There has been considerable delay in the elaboration of these standards; the third version of draft prEN 1005-2, for example, was recently rejected yet again by the members of the CEN, who disagree mainly on the maximum mass and the operator population to be taken into account. The first objection advocating reduction of the maximum mass is probably due to the fact that the reference masses quoted in a standard, although voluntary, can be used for compensation claims. And the second moot point concerns the female working population, which is not properly covered by the draft standard. And finally, it must be borne in mind that these draft standards are limited to MSD risks related to the use of machinery and do not cover working conditions in general.

At the political level we shall have to await the conclusion of the European seminar in Bilbao next October to see whether the Commission will take an initiative in the MSD field. The ad hoc group of the Advisory Committee will also be meeting after the event, next November. This will only be the second session of this group. But the European trade unions are determined to continue to put pressure on both the Commission and the CEN as well as on any other institution that can take political action in this field. ■

**Theoni Koukoulaki**  
tkoukoul@etuc.org

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also the article by Aleid Ringelberg on "European standards and risk assessment for MSD : challenging the future" published in our Special Report : MSDs in Europe, *TUTB Newsletter* no. 11 - 12, June 1999, pp. 39-40.

A fifth project concerning the assessment of risks in the case of repeated handling at high frequency was submitted for consultation in June and comments