



Occupational Health & Safety Authority

Media Release

“Lighten the load” campaign launched in shops and on construction sites

21.04.08

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) constitute the most commonplace work-related health problems. A pan-European campaign on the risk of manual handling in construction sites and shops has just been launched. These two sectors were identified as places where manual handling involves heavy physical load and may lead to musculoskeletal disorders.

It was estimated that in Europe, 24% of workers claim to suffer from backache while 22% suffer from muscle pains. In most new Member States the prevalence of these disorders is even greater – 39% and 36% respectively. It was estimated that half of early retirements in Europe are caused by pathological changes of the backbone.

Moreover, 15% of all cases of inability to work are connected with back disorders. These disorders are one of the main causes of absence at work in all EU Member States. Not only are they a cause of suffering, inability to work and financial losses of the worker, but they also generate high costs incurred by employers and the national economy.

For the last two years national occupational health and safety entities from the EU Member States have been running a campaign entitled “Lighten the load” with the aim of promoting the reduction of manual handling at workplaces. In Malta, the campaign was organised by the Occupational Health and Safety Authority.

'The OHSA puts the prevention of MSDs high on its operational agenda. Various preventive steps could be taken to minimize the risks involved, such as avoiding manual handling as much as possible, reducing the distance covered, as well as literally 'lightening the load' one carries,' Dr Mark Gauci, the OHSA's Chief Executive Officer said.

'Other important factors of prevention include good posture and taking regular breaks from repetitive work. One must also be careful outside working hours since any strenuous activity could aggravate the problem. The OHSA has undertaken a number of activities in the area, including lectures, distribution of informative material as well as targeted inspection campaigns. Various other events will be organized this year to highlight the issues at hand and will be announced on an on-going basis. We encourage all stakeholders to take this campaign to heart and participate actively in it,' Dr Gauci concluded.

This year the campaign covers two high risk sectors – the retail trade and construction where the incidence of manual handling operations is very high.

To cater for the needs of these sectors special communication materials will be published to illustrate good practice in manual handling. OHS officers and labour inspectors will conduct controls in several thousand of undertakings around Europe, in accordance with common criteria. It will allow evaluation and comparison of the situation in different countries as well as register of best practices with regard to manual handling of loads.

"Results of the all the European campaign could be used also in a social dialogue at the European level – in case when improvement of working conditions may result from changes in corporate policy of multinational corporations," said Bożena Borys-Szopa, Chief Labour Inspector of Poland. Poland is coordinating the activities of this year's MHL Campaign.

Last year inspection and communication activities of labour inspectorates were addressed to health care and transport sectors. 26 countries were involved in the project. Nearly 2000 European labour inspectors conducted inspections in medical centers, reloading centers, airports. The Netherlands was then the coordinator of joint actions of European labour inspectorates. Jaap Uijlenbroek, General Director of the Dutch Labour Inspectorate said "I hope that the 2007 and 2008 campaigns are only the beginning of a European campaign cycle on this very important topic of manual handling of loads".

Further information on the campaign as well as informative material may be obtained from the Occupational Health and Safety Authority. (Website: www.ohsa.org.mt email: ohsa@gov.mt)

Notes for Editors:

1. A communications and inspection campaign on manual handling of loads was initiated by the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC) in 2007. SLIC affiliates labour inspectorates from various Member States of the European Union and EFTA countries. The objective of the campaign is to raise awareness about risks connected with manual handling of loads and to promote solutions which eliminate or greatly reduce manual handling.