



Speaking notes (short presentation text)

1) 'Lighten the load'

2) Musculoskeletal disorders are a priority for the EU. The Lisbon Strategy objectives provide not only for an employment activity rate of 70% by 2010, but also for the creation of more and better jobs in Europe. Tackling MSDs, the major work-related health problem in Europe, would contribute to the achievement of this objective. The Community strategies on occupational safety and health at work also identify MSDs as a priority.

Statistics from the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (4th European Working Conditions Survey, 2005) reveal that almost 24% of EU-25 workers report suffering from backache and 22% complain about muscular pains. Both conditions are more prevalent in the new Member States, at 39% and 36% respectively. Some 62% of workers are exposed a quarter of the time or more to repetitive hand and arm movements, 46% to painful or tiring positions and 35% to carrying or moving heavy loads.

3) Work-related MSDs are impairments of the bodily structures such as muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments and nerves or localised blood circulation systems that are caused or aggravated primarily by the performance of work and by the effects of the immediate environment where the work is carried out.

These disorders mainly affect the back, neck, shoulders and upper limbs, but also concern lower limbs. Some MSDs, such as carpal tunnel syndrome in the wrist, are given a name because of their well-defined symptoms. Other MSDs are non-specific because pain or discomfort exists without any evidence of a clear disorder.

Most work-related MSDs are cumulative disorders, resulting from repeated exposures to high or low intensity loads over a long period of time. However, MSDs can also be acute traumas, such as fractures, that occur during an accident.

Risk factors may act separately, but the risk of MSDs developing is greater if several risk factors work together. Factors can be divided into three groups: the physical; the organisational and psychosocial; and those that relate to individuals.

Examples of these risks are:

- physical - force, repetitive movements, vibration, awkward postures
- organizational - low autonomy/job satisfaction, repetitive work at a high pace
- individual - medical history, physical capacity, age

4) Lighten the load is the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work's campaign to tackle MSDs in the workplace in 2007. The EU Presidencies of Germany and Portugal in 2007, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European social partners all back the campaign. Lighten the load culminates in the European Week of Safety and Health at Work from 22 to 26 October 2007.

European campaigns have been running since 2000 as an annual series of events to promote improved safety and health in the workplace. The campaign has five strategic objectives: raising awareness, providing information, developing and providing access to resources, encouraging activities that have an impact on the workplace, and identifying and recognising good practice. MSDs were also the subject of the first European campaign in 2000, "Turn your back on MSDs".



5) Lighten the load supports an integrated management approach to tackling MSDs, which includes both prevention of acquiring musculoskeletal problems and retention of workers with MSDs at work. It emphasises the concept of “managing the load”, which covers all the strains being put on the body, as well as the load being carried. Stress, cold working conditions and the pace of work, among others, can all contribute to the development of strains. Therefore, it is important to assess the full range of MSD risks and to address them in a comprehensive way.

The European campaign also aims to support the retention, rehabilitation and reintegration of workers who already suffer from MSDs. Particularly important is the role of social and organisational support in enabling workers both to return to work and subsequently to sustain employment when experiencing MSDs.

6) We all share responsibility for tackling MSDs: as employers; workers and their safety representatives; government; health and safety institutions; and, policy-makers.

Employers are legally required to assess workplace risks and act to ensure the safety and health of workers. But they should do more than just meet their legal obligations. Employers should lead by example, and demonstrate a real commitment to health and safety. This is in employers' own interests: good safety management is good for business and it is a feature of efficient organisations.

Safety isn't all down to the employer - workers also have a responsibility to cooperate with their employer to protect themselves and their colleagues. Employee involvement is essential when tackling workplace hazards - they know the workplace as well as anyone. Workers should receive information and training on MSDs so they know how to avoid specific hazards and risks.

Safety representatives, governments, health and safety institutions and policy-makers all have important roles to play.

7) You can find out more about the Lighten the load campaign on the European Agency website at: <http://ew2007.osha.europa.eu>, and more about MSDs at: <http://osha.europa.eu/msds>