

THE SAÚDE PROJECT - GALICIA REGION (SPAIN)

Type of initiative: Good practice guidelines for workers harvesting shellfish on foot

Timeframe: 2011-2012

1 Description of the initiative

1.1 Introduction

The Strategic Plan for Occupational Risk Prevention in Galicia 2006-2010 set out several measures to improve safety and health conditions in companies and to reduce work-related accidents. Article 4 of Law 14/2007 gives the *Instituto Gallego de Seguridad y Salud Laboral* (Galician Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, ISSGA) responsibility for analysing, investigating and evaluating the causes and determinants of work-related accidents and occupational diseases; developing studies on these areas, and proposing corrective measures where appropriate. During the period 2006-2010, the ISSGA introduced several important measures to address muscle overloads and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), in response to the fact that these accounted for approximately one third of the total number of accidents in Galicia. In 2010, the ISSGA carried out a statistical analysis of injuries due to overexertion, taking into account the types of activities in which these occur and incorporating a gender perspective and assessment of long-term impacts.

The Strategic Plan for Occupational Risk Prevention in Galicia 2011-2014 paid particular attention to the traditional fishing sector, as it is a sector that needs special attention because of the inherent risks factors for workers. The plan placed considerable emphasis on assessing the current situation and problems faced by these workers. Following these assessments, ISSGA allocated more technical and resources within its programme of activities to tackle the problems and developed a plan to improve the health and working conditions of shellfish workers harvesting on foot in Galicia. This was within the framework of other actions carried out by the ISSGA, such as an analysis of injuries sustained at work due to overexertion, the publication of educational materials (an audiovisual presentation on preventing MSDs in workers harvesting shellfish), and a campaign on preventing occupational risks related to overexertion in the hospitality and commerce sectors.

More than 4,600 people (including some 4,100 women) in the Galicia Autonomous Community are employed in harvesting shellfish on foot, which involves extracting and gathering shellfish. Although the work tools used in the activity have evolved, the clothing (garments and footwear) and working practices have undergone little change.

1.2 Aim of the initiative

The Saúde project aimed to assess the current health situation and risk factors affecting shellfish harvesters (including those relating to MSDs) to identify the workers' needs and to develop guidelines on best practices to prevent MSDs.

1.3 Organisations involved

The project was developed by the *Instituto Gallego de Seguridad y Salud Laboral* (Galician Institute of ISSGA) with the participation of workers in the sector, represented by the *Asociación Gallega de Mariscadoras* (Galician Association of Shellfish Harvesters, AGAMAR) and the local associations of workers (*cofradías*).

This facilitated the workers' participation in the medical examination and in the development of good practice guidelines. Other organisations involved were the *Centro Tecnológico del Mar* (Sea Technological Centre, CETMAR), the *Centro tecnológico LEITAT* (LEITAT Technological Centre, LEITAT) and the *Instituto de Biomecánica de Valencia* (Biomechanical Institute of Valencia, IBV), which were involved in designing innovative clothing to address some of the problems identified during the medical study.

1.4 What was done and how

A medical assessment of workers harvesting shellfish on foot was undertaken to identify potential health problems and better understand their needs. Three important characteristics of the workers in this sector were particularly relevant to this initiative. The first is that the majority of people doing this work (98 %) are women. The second is that most workers are over 40 years old (around 83 %). And the third is that workers in this sector are self-employed.

This first part of the study allowed the main problems that affected workers in this sector to be identified. With the participation of the association of workers and the public institutions, the medical specialists collected data about the workers, which included health information and other information related to their work activities. Among the most important findings were that 54 % of the workers had suffered from health conditions related to their work and that 72.5 % were experiencing pain at the time of the study: with 37 % were suffering from low back pain; 25 % were presenting with neck pain; and 17 % were presenting with carpal tunnel syndrome.

Having identified the workers' needs, the Saúde project developed guidelines on good practices. These focused particularly on the prevention and alleviation of MSDs related to the working conditions of harvesting shellfish on foot. The guidelines included useful advice to protect workers from risk factors, including physical exercise and stretching techniques to be used before starting work and good postures to adopt while doing the work.

It was also recognised that the use of inappropriate clothing caused discomfort (including lesions), because it failed to protect the workers against mechanical injury and adverse weather conditions. As part of this, it was found that inadequate thermal protection (insulation) was allowing workers to become chilled, thus increasing the risk of MSDs as well as other physical risks (e.g. friction, bruising and cuts). New work wear was therefore designed to help protect workers from those physical risks and the extreme conditions.

The project had four phases:

1. Identification of health problems stemming from harvesting shellfish on foot. In this phase, a medical study assessed the health of workers to identify the most important exposure risks, including ergonomic risks, and it also identified the conditions under which the work was performed, including weather, work tools and the clothing used by workers.
2. Based on the findings of the first phase, development of best practice guidelines and other related interventions to improve the working conditions.
3. Other interventions to improve the working conditions of shellfish harvesters included the design of new clothing adapted to prevent some of the occupational hazards associated with the job (e.g. to ensure protection against exposure to wet conditions, cold and sun), thereby helping to reduce the risk of MSDs.
4. Transfer and dissemination of results. During this phase, guideline on good practices were developed, which covered optimum postures to adopt during shellfish harvesting as well as the use and maintenance of the new clothing.

1.5 What was achieved

Of the 45 local associations of shellfish harvesters in Galicia, 32 participated in the medical study. This high level of participation (a total of 936 workers) was possible thanks to the collaboration between the organisations involved in the study (ISSGA, AGAMAR and local associations of workers).

The main characteristics of the population of workers (e.g. the majority were women) were considered when developing the good practice guidelines. This was also taken into account when designing the new clothing, adapted to the workers' physical characteristics (e.g. size, body type), and it was then tested and evaluated by the users, helping to improve the protection it provided.

1.6 Success factors and challenges

Several features contributed to the success of this project. Firstly, the project was a collaborative effort between various institutions, including a public authority (the ISSGA), a workers' association (AGAMAR), the local association of workers (*cofradías*), and other organisations such as a private research centre (LEITAT) and a university research institute (the IBV). This wide range of collaborators facilitated the identification of the main problems experienced by workers harvesting shellfish on foot, including MSDs. The project was also based on several assessments of the risks and needs associated with harvesting shellfish on foot, and it formed part of a broader strategy to address the safety and health needs of this specific sector (as highlighted in the ISSGA's annual reports).

1.7 Transferability

Given the specific target group of the project, its transferability is limited to other countries and regions with similar shellfish harvesting sectors. More broadly, however, the role of the ISSGA in coordinating this significant collaboration among diverse public and private bodies to prevent MSDs — by identifying needs, developing and disseminating best practices and using new technologies (such as adapted clothing) — is an approach that could usefully be transferred to other sectors, countries and regions.

2 Background

Data from the Eurostat Labour Force Survey ad hoc modules show that, in the 5 years from 2007 to 2013, the percentage of workers in Spain reporting some form of MSD remained essentially unchanged, from 62.1 % to 62.3 %, compared with an overall EU increase from 54.2 % to 60.1 % in the same period. Data specifically relating to the Galicia region are not available from that source.

National legislation implementing the provisions of the Manual Handling Directive includes no additional measures. National legislation reflecting the requirements of the Display Screen Equipment Directive extends the requirements for a risk assessment, requiring employers to consider the characteristics of the job and the demands of the task as well as:

- (a) the average daily time spent at a computer;
- (b) the maximum continuous attention required for the task;
- (c) the degree of concentration required by that task.

Psychosocial risks are increasingly being recognised as a causal or contributory factor in work-related MSDs. In Spain, Law 31/1995 on the prevention of occupational risks establishes the employers' obligation to assess the health risks arising from work activities. In addition, Royal Decree 39/1997 approved the Regulation of Prevention Services in the field of safety and health at work, forcing employers to take preventive measures to assess and control psychosocial and organisational factors that may pose a risk to workers' health.

References and resources

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- (3) ISSGA, *Good practice guidelines for health and safety in on-foot shellfish harvesting*. Available in Spanish at: http://issga.xunta.gal/export/sites/default/recursos/descargas/documentacion/publicacions/guia_marisqueo_a_pe.pdf
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