



## **NATIONAL INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATION E-NETWORK DEVELOPING THE ERGONOMICS OF MANUAL HANDLING OF PATIENTS**

### **Organisation**

The Centre for Occupational Safety, Helsinki

### **Introduction**

According to the questionnaire on working conditions and well-being in the social and health care sector conducted in 2005 in Finland, the biggest concern is the difficult situation of the social and health care personnel working with chronic patients, old people in care institutions, and the staff carrying out home-care duties. The patients and clients are now in poorer condition than earlier, and their problems are more complex. The work is physically heavy and requires a high level of occupational knowledge. Poor working postures and the manual handling and lifting of the patients are the physically heaviest phases in care work. The work is especially heavy in the bed wards of health care centres and in home-care. According to a survey conducted in the EU, one half of the nursing assistants and slightly less than a half of the nurses in Finland lift patients more than ten times every day. One third of the social and health care personnel lift manually loads weighing over 25 kg.

It is of vital importance to lighten the heaviest work tasks in health care, namely the manual handling and lifting of patients. This immediately affects the loading of those employed now, and in the long-term has a positive impact on the recruiting of workforce to the health care sector.

Research has shown that health care personnel suffer especially from musculoskeletal problems, and that the lifting and transferring of patients are typical situations leading to accidents among the workers. Concern is expressed about the continuing increase of musculoskeletal diseases. The prevalence of work-related accidents is on average 34% greater in the social and health care sector than in other occupations in the EU.

The biggest problems that impede the improvement of the ergonomics of the manual handling of patients are:

- lack of cooperation between different quarters;
- lack of a systematic plan of action;
- the management's low level of commitment;
- deficiencies in professional training;
- lack of qualified teachers;
- as well as a negative attitude.

Active collaboration is needed between various actors in developing good practices in the moving and transferring of patients. Well-functioning multi-professional cooperation at many levels should be promoted, not only at workplaces, but also between educational institutions, and among educational institutions and representatives of work life and trainee workplaces.

## **Aims**

The aim of this work was to promote active, well functioning, multi-professional collaboration and cooperation between various stakeholders in developing good practices in the moving and transferring of patients.

## **What was done, and how**

As a result of a proposition of the Finnish Work Environment Fund, in 2001 the Finnish Centre for Occupational Safety invited an expert work group to discuss the need to analyse and develop the ergonomics of manual handling of patients in health care work. In 2004, the expert group established an interactive communication e-network concentrating on the ergonomics of manual patient handling. The information network is governed by the municipal coalition of the Centre for Occupational Safety.

The purpose of the network is to promote the health and well-being of health care workers engaged in patient handling. Attention is focussed on work tasks involving the lifting and transferring of patients. The network concentrates on gathering and spreading useful information on ergonomic lifting practices in order to promote the health and safety of both the workers and the patients / clients. The network is based on spontaneous participation, and it aims at keeping the activity open and transparent, emphasising a sense of responsibility, confidentiality, equality and commitment. The criteria for participating in the network are acceptance of the rules of action, and obligation to promote better ergonomics within the scope of one's professional role.

In the start-up meeting, the Occupational Safety Department of the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Municipal Labour Market Institute, the Centre for Occupational Safety, and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health agreed to commit to the network. From the beginning, the Finnish Work Environment Fund has been an active member of the information communication network. It was hoped that the network would attract members from different quarters as broadly as possible, namely, representatives of educational and other authorities, decision-makers at workplaces, planners and designers, researchers, trainers, manufacturers and suppliers of lifting aids and equipment, and representatives of insurance companies and sponsors.

By the summer of 2007, the membership in the national network had risen to over 150 persons, and during its operation time, 27 e-mail letters have been sent to the network. In addition, every year a 1–2-day national work seminar is organised within the network, serving as an interactive discussion forum. In 2007, local network activity was started in south-eastern Finland as well. The

purpose of this smaller network is to gather local experiences and good practices, and transmit them for wider use in the national information network.

The network transmits information primarily through its members, who tell about the activities of the network to their own contact persons, colleagues and workmates and encourage them to join the network.

## **What was achieved**

### **Effectiveness of results**

The information communication network on the ergonomics of manual patient handling is an interactive forum, where ideas, experiences, information, current events, knowledge as well as good practices can be shared and discussed. The network provides an easy way of transmitting the latest research results and practical knowledge and experiences to different groups of users. Dialogue on theoretical as well as practical aspects of ergonomics is possible, and accessible to all members. The network is composed of a wide variety of practitioners with different kinds of work roles from all parts of the country. The members are physiotherapists, occupational safety chiefs and delegates, safety personnel and decision-makers at workplaces, occupational health nurses, head nurses, representatives of the authorities, teachers of vocational and other educational institutes, researchers, planners, as well as representatives of labour market organisations and sponsors. The core of the activity is based on the knowledge and skills of each member. By using the network, each member is able to acquire as well as to disseminate current knowledge about the ergonomics of manual patient handling.

Thus far the network has provided its members with:

- contact information;
- links to information sources;
- research results and references to additional studies;
- on-going projects;
- publications and training courses.

The network members have reported that:

- they have received good suggestions and useful hints for improving their own work;
- they have been inspired to take action, and to discuss the development needs and the improvement of ergonomics at their own workplace;
- they can share the patient handling problems they are experiencing.

The network has:

- advanced collaboration and enabled new contacts with specialists;

- inspired belief that ergonomic improvements are progressing.

In the network seminar of 2006, examples of good practice in the ergonomics of patient handling were collected from the network members' workplaces. These included:

- joint teaching classes for different student groups in vocational education;
- common rules agreed upon by educational institutes and apprentice workplaces;
- the commitment and cooperation of the management and supervisors;
- the close collaboration between workplaces, occupational safety people and health services;
- the demonstration of lifting aids and opportunities to test and use them;
- that the purchasing and servicing of lifting equipment, as well as the designing of work spaces should be planned and organised together with the staff using them and the occupational health personnel;
- how to ensure the workers' well-being at work;
- opportunities for systematic and continuous training;
- scheduling regular times for practising manual patient handling in the workplace;
- showing a series of pictures illustrating proper handling techniques.

Naming a network of contact persons at the workplace responsible for the ergonomics of lifting and handling patients was also perceived to be a positive achievement.

It is essential for the successful functioning of the network that persons with national prestige are involved in its activity. They have an influential role in the actual patient handling at workplaces, in the collaborative functions of occupational safety and occupational health services, as decision-makers, as educators in vocational institutes, as researchers, etc. They are active in producing as well as transmitting up-to-date information and current development trends in the ergonomics of manual patient handling.

The e-network is based on existing tools used routinely by the specialists, and the activity itself takes place as part of the normal activity of the network members. This means that the costs of the activity are minimal. It is not necessary to purchase new infrastructure for the network or to hire people.

The main benefits of the network are:

- information is transmitted quickly for the use of the recipient;
- interactive cooperation develops and improves;
- a variety of good practice, experiences, the latest research results, and training materials are disseminated widely;
- the activity encourages openness; after getting information for him/herself, the member forwards useful information for the use of the entire network;
- a nationwide, expanding information communication network inspires and activates the creation of local networks;
- the information communication network on the ergonomics of manual patient handling for specialists serves as a model for similar interaction in any other corresponding speciality area.

## **Further information**

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## **Transferability**

This procedure is easily transferred to other member states in EU and to other workplaces.