



ERGONOMIC PROTECTIONS FOR WORKERS

Workers in this country need an ergonomic standard to prevent crippling repetitive strain injuries, the nation's biggest job safety problem. An ergonomic standard should be designed to reduce ergonomic hazards and prevent back injuries, carpal tunnel syndrome and other muscular-skeletal disorders (MSDs) by requiring employers to respond to worker's whose MSDs are shown to be caused by exposure to ergonomic hazards on the job.

After more than 10 years of struggle against vicious industry attacks and millions of crippling injuries to workers, OSHA issued a spinal ergonomic standard in November 2000. The ergonomic standard would have prevented hundreds of thousands of injuries each year by requiring employers to reduce ergonomic hazards in the workplace. Ergonomic hazards are the nation's number one job safety problem, injuring and crippling more than 600,000 workers each year.

But, as pay back to their corporate campaign contributors, the Republican controlled Congress and President Bush repealed this important worker safety measure, leaving workers with no protection.

The lives of workers who suffer from MSDs, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis or back injuries are changed forever. Many workers are crippled by debilitating wrist, shoulder and lower back pain. These workers often loose their jobs and many become permanently unemployed or are forced to take a severe pay cuts to continue working.

When OSHA held public hearings around the country on its proposed ergonomic standard, hundreds of injured workers came to testify. They spoke of their pain and suffering, the impact on their lives and called on the government to take action to protect other workers from injuries.

For every day that passes without an ergonomic standard, 4,932 new ergonomic injuries incur, potentially crippling these workers and ruining their lives. It's time to stop the pain by protecting workers from ergonomic hazards.

Real world experience shows that ergonomic programs work. Companies that have an ergonomic program that includes the five basic elements have successfully controlled hazards, reduced ergonomic stressers, and significantly reduced injuries, all while saving money and increasing productivity. The five elements are:

1. Management commitment
2. Employee involvement
3. Education
4. Job hazard analysis and hazard control
5. Medical management of ergonomic injuries (program evaluation)

MDSs are a major national problem costing the economy by conservative estimates over \$50 billion each year, according to OSHA and confirmed by the recent report by the National Academy of Sciences. Every year employers pay between \$15-18 billion on worker's compensation costs alone.

According to OSHA, it's now defunct ergonomic standard would have cost businesses \$3.5 billion annually, but would have generated benefits of more than \$9 billion each year in the first ten years it was in effect by preventing 4.6 million MSDs. The savings from improved productivity were estimated to save another \$700 million each year.

Business associations, as expected, disputed OSHA's conclusions, and estimated that the rule could cost \$100 billion each year with brutal or no benefits. These industry estimates are nothing new. Over the past 30 years, business associations have grossly inflated projected compliance costs and have predicted widespread bankruptcy as a result of almost every standard OSHA has issued or proposed.

But, in the 1995 study by the **Office of Technology Assessment (OTA)**, they looked at several OSHA standards that had been in effect for a number of years to determine the accuracy of cost and benefit estimates by OSHA and the regulated industries. *The study showed that not only does industry grossly over estimate expected costs but even OSHA routinely over estimates the cost and under estimated the benefits of standards.* OTA found that part of the reason that OSHA over estimates costs is that the agency fails to take into account the fact that American businesses are especially talented at developing new technologies that are much more cost effective and efficient than OSHA had predicted.

The real bottom line is that without ergonomic protections, workers pay the highest costs. The OSHA record contains story after story of how workers were often afraid to file for worker's compensation because they or their co-workers had been fired, disciplined or lost money after reporting MSDs. The financial burdens created by MSDs result in workers losing their homes and health insurance. Injured workers are often unable to lead a normal life and experience great difficulty performing routine activities such as riding, cleaning, caring for children, bathing and driving a car.

The **National Academy of Sciences** and the **Institute of Medicine** recently released their long awaited report on MDSs in the workplace. The report requested by industry groups and conservative republicans who opposed the OSHA ergonomics standard, *finds that there is strong scientific evidence showing that exposure to ergonomic hazards in the workplace cause MSDs and that these injuries can be prevented.* Prepared by some of the world's top scientific and medical experts, the report calls *MSDs an important national problem and strongly supports the approach that OSHA took* in its now defunct ergonomics program standard.

Addressing ergonomics, like other workplace health and safety hazards, involves hazard recognition and control. We need a new ergonomic standard. This standard should be proactive and preventative and require employers to reduce exposures to ergonomic hazards whether or not an injury occurs. Our goal is to protect workers from exposure to these ergonomic hazards and the health effects that they cause sooner rather than later.