

# Safety rep

## Study finds long-term shift work bad for brain

**Long-term shift work could be linked to impaired brain power and has an ageing effect on the brain, according to a new study by researchers in the UK and France.**

The research, *Chronic effects of shift work on cognition*, found that shift work affects brain function in the same way that severe jet lag affects the natural body clock, bringing increasing health problems.

The study, published in *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, follows earlier studies on the link between shift work and health problems such as breast cancer in women and obesity.

The research involved a group of over 3,000 employed and retired workers living in France and aged 32, 42, 52 and 62. They were first assessed in 1996, then five and 10 years afterwards. Researchers tested the group's brain



Philip Wolnuth (Reportdigital.co.uk)

**Research showed a link between shift work and brain function**

function in terms of speed and memory over this time.

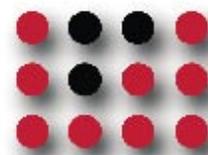
The results showed that there was a link between shift work and brain function, particularly for those who had done shift work for more than 10 years.

This group showed the equivalent of six-and-a-half years of age-related reduced brain function, compared to those who had not done shift work over 10 years or more. While brain function reduces naturally with age, prolonged shift work was found to speed up this process.

The research revealed that brain function did recover after doing shift work, although this took at least five years.

The authors, led by Dr Jean-Claude Marquié of the University of Toulouse, say shift workers' health should be closely monitored.

They warn: "The cognitive impairment observed in the present study may have important safety consequences ... given the increasing number of jobs in high-hazard situations that are performed at night."



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## Union fears over blacklisting

**Construction workers' union UCATT has called for a new employee screening scheme to be postponed over fears that it could be used to blacklist building workers.**

The scheme, announced by the National Federation of Builders (NFB), has

been promoted to "ensure an employee and their history really is who and what they claim to be". However, UCATT general secretary Steve Murphy said the scheme has the potential to lead to the blacklisting of construction workers.

"The scheme should be postponed until workers are fully reassured that blacklisting will not and cannot occur," he added.

The NFB is a member of the Construction Industry Joint Council (CIJC). The CIJC agreement has a clear anti-blacklisting rule.

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# Campaign says there is no time to lose on occupational cancer

**A new campaign aims to encourage a better understanding of occupational cancer, Safety rep reports.**

*No time to lose*, a campaign launched last month by the Institute of Safety and Health (IOSH), is calling for the government and employers to work together to prevent more people suffering from occupational cancer.

The campaign is certainly timely and necessary as there are at least 8,000 occupational cancer deaths each year in Britain, according to the latest annual report from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

The HSE's *Health and safety statistics annual report for Great Britain 2013-14* reveals that more than half of these cancer deaths were caused by earlier exposure to asbestos (either mesothelioma or asbestos-related lung cancer). The next four biggest groups of occupational cancer were lung cancer caused by silica, diesel engine exhaust and mineral oils and breast cancer due to shift work.

Writing recently in *Safety and Health Practitioner* magazine, Phil Bates, senior policy and technical advisor at IOSH, outlines the need to get the causes of occupational cancer better understood and for businesses to be supported to take action.

Bates emphasises the seriousness of the issue by pointing to the 666,000 who die each year worldwide because of occupational cancer, adding that work cancer is "the barely visible

cause of an unbearably high number of deaths".

It is "barely visible", he explains, broadly for two reasons — "the literal invisibility" of carcinogens, as well as "the latency of their effects". Bates points out that some cancers are diagnosed up to 10 years after the sufferer has been exposed, often unknowingly, to a carcinogen at work, while others can take more than 35 years to develop.

And he comments on an assumption about occupational cancer — that it may be thought to occur only once people have retired.

However, Bates points out: "Around a quarter of deaths and registrations from occupational cancer occur before the age of 65, with some losing their battle with the disease when still in their 30s.

"Others will be delivered a slower death sentence, with victims suffering an ever-shrinking quality of life at a time when they should be getting ready to enjoy a well-earned retirement."

Bates adds that research published in the *British Journal of Cancer* in 2010 examined the causes of avoidable cancer attributable to lifestyle or environmental factors, and found occupational exposure was the fifth most common cause of avoidable cancer (after tobacco, diet, obesity and alcohol).

He says that, despite all this, tackling occupational cancer is not rocket science. "We are doing much of what is required, but we just need to do more of it."

As part of the *No time to lose* campaign, IOSH cites

case studies, including that of Linda Lakin who is backing the campaign and who contracted mesothelioma after exposure to carcinogens at work. Lakin, now aged 62, was diagnosed with the disease after being exposed to asbestos during a two-year period while working for a dry cleaning company in Norfolk when she was in her 20s.

She said: "There's no excuse now, because we know there are carcinogens, we know what many of them are, and we know what to do to protect those at risk of exposure."

Construction union UCATT is supporting the IOSH campaign. UCATT general secretary Steve Murphy said that workplace cancers kill hundreds of construction workers every year and the IOSH campaign will raise awareness and help to reduce deaths. Murphy added that the campaign should be backed up by

strong enforcement action so that those responsible for needlessly exposing workers to fatal substances should be prosecuted.

The *Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (as amended)* (COSHH) require employers to control hazardous substances and exposure to carcinogens.

Where an employer has established that there are hazardous substances in the workplace, a detailed and extensive COSHH risk assessment needs to be carried out.

Unions and the TUC have long been campaigning against the use of carcinogens in the workplace.

The TUC says trade unions' aim is for there to be no workplace exposure to anything that causes cancer. Where possible, this will mean removing carcinogens from the workplace completely.

## No Time to lose campaign

The *No time to lose* campaign established by the Institute of Safety and Health wants to raise awareness and offer practical support to businesses by focusing on five key causes of occupational cancer registrations and deaths.

These are:

- ◆ diesel engine exhaust emissions — affecting many industries, including transport, construction trades, energy extraction, warehousing, agriculture and mechanics;
- ◆ solar radiation — a number of trades are affected, from construction through to road working and farm working;
- ◆ asbestos — affecting many industries, mostly construction and trades like plumbing or maintenance, but also sectors like retail, education and public services, where older buildings will contain asbestos;
- ◆ shift work — largely an issue for women, unlike other male-dominated areas; and
- ◆ silica — affecting roof workers, stonecutters, construction workers and road workers.

# Stress at work still top concern for safety reps

**Stress, bullying and harassment, overwork, back strains and slips, and trips and falls on a level were the top five hazards cited by respondents to the TUC's 11th safety rep survey.**

Two-thirds of safety reps replying to the survey identified stress as a top-five concern.

There has been a slight decline with 67% identifying stress as a top-five hazard compared with 69% two years ago. However, concern over stress has risen to alarming levels in central government where 87% of safety reps referred to it as a top-five concern compared with 80% in 2012.

Bullying and harassment has grown as a concern. It was reported by 46% of safety reps as a top-five concern compared to 41% in 2012. In the public sector, half of all safety reps cited it as one of their top five hazards. Eight out of 11 or

73% of safety reps in the banking, finance and insurance sectors also cited it as a top-five concern.

Concern around overwork has risen once again. An excessive workload was reported by 36% of safety reps as a top-five concern compared with 33% two years ago.

Back strain was cited by 33% of respondents as a top-five concern – up from 32% in 2012. And slips trips and falls were mentioned in 32% of replies – the same percentage as 2012.

One hazard that has been less of a concern is display screen equipment. This was only mentioned by 22% of respondents, compared with 26% two years ago and 28% in 2010.

The survey found that, while risk assessments were carried out in most workplaces, many were deficient. One in five risk assessments were considered inadequate by

union safety reps where they were carried out.

TUC general secretary Frances O'Grady said: "It's shocking that so many employers are breaking the law and putting their staff at risk of illness and accidents by their sheer negligence. Not only does this put people in danger while doing their jobs, the consequences also carry a high cost for British businesses and public services because it results in lower productivity and more staff spending time off sick.

"Stress remains the top concern for health and safety workplace reps. It's a particular problem in parts of the public sector like the NHS and local government that have been hit by cuts and top-down reorganisations. Sickness and absence from stress is one of the false economies of public sector austerity."

Survey is available at: [www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/HealthandSafetySurvey2014.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/HealthandSafetySurvey2014.pdf)

## Shop staff have to face violence

**Over the last 12 months, more than 300 frontline retail staff were assaulted every day, a survey by shopworkers' union Usdaw has revealed.**

And the union also found that one in six shopworkers did not report a violent attack to their employer.

Speaking at Respect for Shopworkers Week last month, general secretary John Hannett said that too often retail employees are confronted with violence, threats and abuse.

"In the course of their duties, shopworkers are expected to enforce the law. Whether that is preventing under-age purchases of products like knives, tobacco or alcohol, or detaining shoplifters until the police arrive, they can be put in real danger," he said.

"Parliament has given shopworkers the duty to enforce the law and Parliament should provide the necessary protection.

"So it has been disappointing to see Tory and Liberal MPs, on four occasions in the last couple of years, combine to vote down additional legal protections when proposed by Labour."

He said the union continues to campaign for a change in the law to ensure that proper punishments are given out.

"We must give a clear message that assaulting workers who are serving the public is totally unacceptable."

Some staff said they do not report violent attacks as they don't feel it would make any difference if they do, while others said they saw it as just a part of being in a frontline job.

## Ditch clause on exemption

**Entertainment union BECTU has written to members of the House of Lords calling on them to overturn plans to exempt the self-employed from health and safety law.**

The *Deregulation Bill* is being considered by the House of Lords, before it can become a law. Clause 1 of the bill proposes that those who are self-employed and not on a "prescribed list" will be exempt from health and safety laws. The entertainment sector is not on the list leaving many of BECTU's freelance members in film TV, theatre

and the events industry without protection.

The union wants to the Lords to overturn clause 1 or amend it so that it would only apply where self-employed workers are at no risk of injury and pose no risk to others.

BECTU general secretary Gerry Morrissey said: "Work in the entertainment sector is team-based, with a mix of employees and self-employed workers. Management of health and safety will ... be undermined in the frequent situations where a proportion of the workforce is not covered by the regulations."

"There will also, sadly, be instances of less responsible employers taking advantage of the exemption to water down whatever management processes they may have in place for health and safety, thus endangering our members."

Morrissey cited recent HSE figures, which show that self-employed workers are nearly three times more likely to die at work than employees.

And, although deaths at work are rare in the entertainment industry, every one in the last five years has involved self-employed freelancers.

## Construction blitz

Dangerous practices and unacceptable conditions were found by the HSE in a month-long inspection blitz of construction sites.

Poor standards or dangerous practices were found at two out of five (40%) or 691 out of 1,748 sites inspected.

One in five (21%) or 360 sites inspected in the repair and refurbishment sector required formal enforcement action so poor were their practices. The blitz resulted in the issue of 313 prohibition notices and 235 improvement notices.

The most common issues found by the HSE related to working at height and falls (42%), failure to control dust (12%), insufficient welfare (12%) and asbestos (10%).

Steve Murphy, general secretary of the UCATT construction union, called the findings “simply appalling” as “time after time employers are putting workers in danger”

“Most construction workers never see an HSE inspector unless a major accident has occurred,” Murphy added.

## Transport safety

The HSE has updated its guide on workplace transport safety highlighting what employers need to do to reduce risk to its workers and the public.

The guide includes specific advice on controlling workplace transport risks focusing on three main areas: a safe site in terms of design and activity, a safe vehicle and a safe driver.

There are new sections on multi-deck vehicles as well as details of changes on weighbridges and sheeting.

Guide is available at: [www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg136.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg136.pdf)

# Too many deaths and too many injuries in workplace

The latest annual HSE statistics covering 2013-14 show that there were 133 fatal injuries in 2013-14 compared to 150 in the previous year. There were 42 fatalities in construction – two more than the previous year.

There were also 2,535 mesothelioma deaths due to past asbestos exposures based on 2012 figures.

In addition, there were 264 members of the public fatally injured in accidents connected to work in 2013-14. Around three-quarters of these deaths – 73% or 194 deaths – related to incidents occurring on railways, including acts of suicide or trespass.

There were 28.2 million working days lost due to work-related illness and

injuries. The estimated cost of injuries and ill health is £14.2 billion, based on 2012-13 figures.

The statistics also show that an estimated two million working people reported suffering from a work-related illness which was either on-going or new, which they believed was made worse by their current or previous work. There were 184,000 cases of musculoskeletal disorders reported in 2013-2014 – almost a third (30%) more than the 141,000 cases reported the last time they were covered in 2011-12.

There were 77,593 other injuries at work reported under the watered down 2013 *Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations*.

In terms of enforcement action, there were just 674 prosecutions across Great Britain for a breach of health and safety law in 2013-14 – a 5% fall on the previous year. They led to 636 convictions for at least one health and safety offence and resulted in fines totalling £18 million.

Prosecutions by either the HSE or local authorities in England and Wales which resulted in a conviction were down by 8% to 602 cases, most of which were won by the HSE (517 or 86% of cases). In Scotland, the number of successful prosecutions taken by the procurator fiscal increased by around a third from 26 to 34 cases.

Latest statistics are available at: [www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/)

# Just soap and water is fine

New research carried out by the HSE looks at the effectiveness of alcohol-based hand gels and hand wipes and how they compare to hand washing using soap and water.

The research looked the existing data on alcohol-based hand gels and hand wipes and how effective they are at removing contamination in the workplace and outdoors. In particular, the research considered contamination in commercial waste and recycling activity, agriculture, outdoor events and construction sites.

Alcohol-based hand gels were found to offer a

significant reduction in microbiological hand contamination. However, this was only to the extent that they were used when hands appeared physically clean. This was because hand gels do not allow for the contamination to be washed off as hand washing does.

This finding has implications for work carried out in sectors where it might not be possible for hands to always be physically clean, for example, agriculture.

Looking at the effectiveness of hand wipes, these were found to depend on the type of active chemicals on the wipe and

the way in which the wipe was used. The amount of active chemicals found during research appeared to be significantly less than the amount found in hand gels.

The research concluded that the use of soap and warm running water for hand washing remained an effective way to reduce microbiological contamination. The use of soap and cold running water was also been shown to be as effective, though slightly less so than using soap and warm water.

Full details of the research is available at: [www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr1007.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr1007.pdf)