

Rail industry occupational health

Working on the railways can be a very dangerous job. When thinking of the obvious hazards, what first springs to mind is perhaps the risk of being hit by a train or the danger of assault (for those in more customer-facing roles). However, it's often easy to forget the multitude of other, more common hazards to a worker's health.

There can sometimes be a tendency for health & safety managers to focus more on 'safety' factors, as 'health' is often viewed as a less urgent issue. This careful balance needs to be readdressed, as proactively managing employee health will have significant long term benefits.

Many people assume that where Personal Track Safety (PTS) medicals are performed there is little need for any other occupational health services. This is a common misconception. In fact, the purpose of a PTS medical is to assess how a person's health may impact on their trackside safety. So other health conditions, which are less likely to cause immediate danger from a safety perspective, may not be identified.

Within this article we'll attempt to identify the key occupational health issues within the rail industry and will suggest ways of effectively minimising and managing these problems.

Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Musculoskeletal disorders are commonly thought of as the most common group of work related health problems. They include back pain, work-related neck and upper limb disorders, repetitive strain injuries, and lower limb disorders.

According to a 2007 report more than one million employees a year suffer resulting in an estimated 9.5 million days lost working days in the UK. Raising awareness, prevention and management are all key factors in reducing MSDs.

Planning a safe pattern of work and considering ergonomic issues are vital. The prevention of injuries is certainly better than cure. However, where a problem



already exists research has shown that swift access to treatment is very important.

Recently there seems to have been a shift in attitude and it has been suggested that sufferers tend to recover more quickly by staying at work. The Work Foundation's 2007 report advises that employers and GPs should focus more on what people can do rather than incapacity. The government also seems to be adopting this approach in relation to sickness incapacity benefit.

It's important for managers to have links with a reputable occupational health provider with specialist doctors who can access MSD cases and give practical advice. The core aim is to recommend a sensible rehabilitation programme, gently easing that person back to work without exacerbating the problem. Every case is

different so it's important that the correct course of action is followed to ensure a successful and full recovery.

Stress

Stress has also been identified as one of the most common work related illnesses and is a problem across all industries in the UK. It's often more universal factors which are important, such as how well you are managed and how much control you have over your job, rather than

the type of job you actually do. Strict timetables and working to sharp deadlines can be problematic as well as being on the front line in dealing with the general public – all common within rail specific jobs.

Obviously, a certain amount of pressure is normal and healthy within a role but it's important for managers to recognise that excessive or prolonged levels of pressure are unhealthy and need to be controlled.

High levels of stress can take its toll on both physical and mental Wellbeing. Common manifestations of stress are disturbed sleeping patterns, nightmares, impaired performance, poor judgement and loss of confidence.

Many companies choose to introduce an 'Employee Assistance Programme'. This is a confidential outsourced telephone advice line which offers both practical and emotional advice on a whole range of issues. It offers employees an extra level of

support and someone they can talk to about anything that is a worry.

Awareness of stress-related issues is key. Managers are ideally placed as the 'first line of defence' for companies and its important they know how to detect the early signs and symptoms of stress so that they can pick up any individual who is experiencing difficulties at work before they go off sick.



This is the preventative approach to stress that is needed if a company is to be truly protected from the threat of litigation for stress related illness.

Noise-induced hearing loss

This is another common problem amongst rail

workers who are usually exposed to very high levels of noise, not only from trains, but also from the tools and equipment they use. In recent years, the damage caused by excessive noise has been focused on and The Control of Noise at Work Regulations now require employers to introduce a series of protective measures to limit the opportunity for noise induced hearing loss. In addition to other preventative steps, employers are also required to introduce a programme of



regular hearing assessments for those employees exposed to high noise levels at work.

Hearing surveillance is valuable as it:

- Enables a warning of the early signs of hearing damage
- Identifies cases of established hearing loss
- Provides an opportunity to reduce the risk
- Checks that control measures are actually working

A baseline audiogram should be conducted prior to occupational noise exposure. For employees already exposed to high noise levels, a programme can be introduced at any time, although sooner rather than later is advisable.

The baseline check should be followed with annual assessments for the first two years and then at regular intervals thereafter (e.g. every two years). If an abnormality is detected it may be necessary to refer the individual for further examination with a hearing specialist.

Introducing regular hearing tests for all high-risk employees will help identify problems before it's too late. Noise-induced hearing loss is permanent and irreversible but it's also 100 per cent preventable. This is why it's vital that companies treat this issue seriously and comply with legislation.

Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome

At least five million workers in the UK are believed to be exposed to 'dangerous' levels of vibration, and with Vibration White Finger the most commonly



recorded disease under RIDDOR, it is time to take the issue seriously.

This is a common and potentially debilitating condition that affects many workers who use vibrating tools during their working day. It is a widespread problem in a variety of industries such as mining, construction, utilities, rail and forestry. Exposure to vibration is often through hand-held power tools (e.g. grinders, drills, percussive hammers and chain-saws), hand-guided machinery and/or the holding of materials that are being processed by machines.

Workers are at risk of suffering

permanent damage to their hands. HAVS is characterised by damage to blood vessels, nerves, muscles and soft tissues in the hands. Workers affected may experience tingling, numbness, whitening of their fingers (blanching), reduced dexterity and weakness of grip. The implications of HAVS are widespread, affecting aspects of a person's occupational and social lives.

Where employees are likely to be exposed above the daily exposure action value (EAV), it is a requirement to both introduce controls limiting risk, and put in place a programme of health surveillance. Health surveillance for HAVS consists of a very simple questionnaire which is repeated on an annual basis. The results are usually reviewed and stored by an occupational health professional and if any potential problems are identified then a full examination is arranged with a specially trained doctor or nurse.

Conclusion

The health of employees is influenced by many factors within the spheres of both work and social life. While the role of

occupational health cannot encompass every factor, it's important to create a culture whereby workers' health and wellbeing is supported and influenced.

By ensuring that workers' health is a highlighted issue, employees are shown that they are viewed as a valuable asset. Communicating this sense of value is the first stage in encouraging workers to invest in their own wellbeing. Raising the profile of health is fundamental and

companies will benefit in the long term from less sickness absence and more productive working days. ■

For more information on any of these important occupational health issues please contact:

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