

THE DAILY HAZARD

Homeworkers call for health and safety protection

The seminar, *Winning Rights for Homeworkers* held in Camden Town Hall on 3 March brought together over 50 delegates from trade unions, homeworking organisations, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), local authorities, ethnic minority/community organisations and homeworkers themselves. The London Hazards Centre helped organise the event and led a workshop on health and safety.

Homeworkers have traditionally been an invisible and seriously exploited part of the workforce, unprotected by trade unions or enforcement authorities. However, pilot projects by British Telecom and cost-reduction programmes drawn up by civil service managers have drawn attention to the growth of homeworking in non-traditional sectors. Reduced overheads and the isolation of workers represent clear advantages to employers.

Health and safety has been a key mobilising issue for homeworkers because of the risks to their children as well as to themselves. Homeworkers and their families face a wide range of hazards including exposure to solvents and soldering in electronics and toy manufacture; and repetition strain injuries (RSI) from keyboard work, sewing and other piece-work. Evidence from around the country shows there has been minimal effort by



Homeworkers and their children may be exposed to hazards from equipment, chemicals and dust.

employers to comply with basic laws such as the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations. The National Homeworking Campaign is now trying to encourage

enforcers to make sure factories and suppliers comply with health and safety legislation.

At the seminar, the HSE policy officer Ian Drummond conceded that all homeworkers are covered by the Health and Safety at Work Act and its regulations. The HSE agreed to produce for the first time a booklet aimed at homeworkers and suppliers of homework clarifying health and safety law. However, the HSE proposes only to publish in English. Representatives of unions and homeworkers were united in pointing out the absurdity of this, as homeworkers are frequently from ethnic groups where English is neither spoken nor written. The Centre, the National Homeworking Campaign and the Black and Ethnic Minority Occupational Health Initiative (BEMOHI) would like support in demanding that the booklet is published in appropriate languages.

Workers' Memorial Day demo

The Campaign Against Hazards In London (CAHIL), the Relatives Support Group (RSG) and the Construction Safety Campaign (CSC) demonstrated outside the Health and Safety Commission and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) headquarters in west London on 28 April — Workers' International Memorial Day — to commemorate people killed and injured at work and to protest at weak enforcement of health and safety laws.

Safety reps, trade union officials and bereaved relatives called on the HSE to press for prison sentences for company directors found guilty of negligence. The HSE responded by bolting its doors against the demonstrators

while Director General John Rington snarled: "I do not feel particularly constrained by the ordinary conventions of politeness to put myself to the trouble of responding to your questions".

Readers of the *Camden and St Pancras Chronicle* got a shock when they picked up the 6 May edition of the paper. According to the *Chronicle*: "The Health and Safety Executive joined with the Campaign Against Hazards in London in their march — under the banner 'Jail Not Fine' — which called on the government to jail bosses who kill workers". We predict it will be some time before the HSE joins in the campaign against hazards in London.

Building hazards march

THE prosecution of Kentish Town-based Murphy's Construction for the unlawful death of one of their workers prompted a successful march last week.

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From the *Camden and St Pancras Chronicle* of 6 May 1993

- Write to Ian Drummond at HSE, Baynards House, 1 Chepstow Place, Westbourne Grove, London W2 4TF outlining the language requirements of your local community and workforce.
- The paper on health and safety law presented by the Centre at the seminar is available on request.
- One unfortunate development to report is that Greenwich Homeworkers Group has fallen victim of local authority cuts and will be out of action from June.

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Substituting organic solvents in the print industry

SUBSPRINT, which met in the UK for the first time in March 1993, is a pan-European initiative to substitute the organic solvents currently used in the printing industry, by promoting the use of vegetable oils instead.

In offset printing, machines are cleaned using highly volatile organic solvents. Daily handling of these chemicals exposes printers to the risk of liver, kidney and other organ damage; dermatitis and sensitisation of the skin; central nervous system and brain damage, as well as serious fire and explosion hazards. Emissions into the atmosphere also cause environmental damage and this has led the European Community to seek controls in order to reduce pollution from organic solvents.

In Denmark the Government has recognised 'solvent dementia' since 1976 as an industrial disease. To date around 4,500 sufferers have received compensation for brain damage caused by solvents at work, and the use of solvents in industry has declined as alternative substances are being introduced. In the US the government puts 'chemical neurotoxicity' in its top ten list of workplace diseases, yet here in the UK the

hazard is neither recognised nor compensated. The Danish experience has shown that substitutions can be made. Currently around a third of Danish printing companies are using the alternative products for at least some processes. Firms in Germany and Spain are also running trials of the vegetable based cleaning agents, and now UK firms are coming forward to join the European experiment.

The SUBSPRINT meeting involved the Centre, printers from Denmark, members of the GPMU, manufacturers of alternative vegetable oil products, members of the Print Industry Advisory Committee, the HSE, Greater Manchester Hazards Centre and print industry employers. Clearly there's a lot of interest and concern generated by the possibility of removing health and safety as well as environmental hazards. The HSE made it clear at the meeting that if data sheets show that the new products are inherently safer, then employers

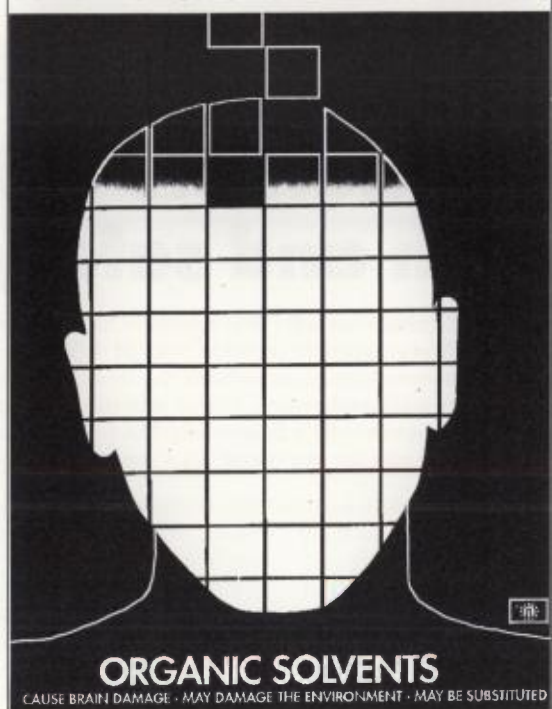
are obliged under COSHH to use them, so it's essential to get good quality, very clear data sheets.

There are problems with using these products. Firstly, there are a lot of new products around, and some can cause skin irritation and dermatitis. Some contain 20% organic solvents while others have various vegetable oil esters, which are solvents too. Secondly it's not an easy substitution to make, as workers have to be trained in new techniques and methods of working. Since vegetable oils evaporate

slowly, they take longer to use, and the floor can get slippery when the oils are spilled. Disposal is still not clearly worked out, either.

While doubts remain about just how far substitution using these products can go, it is clear that volatile organic solvents must be controlled; the most effective way is to substitute other products where possible; and these new products have sufficient advantages for health, safety and the wider environment to be worth developing through trials.

EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN FOR THE
SUBSTITUTION OF ORGANIC SOLVENTS



Government and industry attack Euro regs

The Government has ordered a major review of European health and safety regulations, a development which has prompted the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to warn of the vulnerability of the new health and safety laws during the coming deregulation drive.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has set up an inquiry designed to "cut a swathe

through the jungle of regulations that encumber business". The DTI will be targeting the Regulations introduced earlier this year in line with European Directives (see *Daily Hazard* No.38). In parallel, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is to examine all health and safety legislation to see whether it is "necessary or relevant". Sir John Cullen, Chair of the Health and Safety Com-

mission, announced that the team will be: "concentrating initially on those regulations which appear to cause business the greatest difficulty". John Rimington, Director General of the HSE has gone so far as to say that: "we certainly will not and cannot enforce" the annexe to the Display Screen Equipment Regulations.

In its submission to the Govern-

ment, the TUC said: "Good standards of health and safety management can, in addition to reducing workplace injuries and damage to health, have other important benefits for business such as reducing material damage costs, improving efficiency and cleanliness, improving technological innovation and productivity and improving workforce morale".

VDU WORK AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

In the fifteen years since reports of pregnancy problems among VDU workers first appeared, there has been an almost tenfold increase in the use of VDUs — as many as 10 million are now in use in UK workplaces.

The question of whether or not VDU work increases the risk of miscarriage, birth defects or other adverse reproductive effects remains undecided. This factsheet, which is based on a chapter in the London Hazard Centre's new book: *VDU Work and the Hazards to Health** summarises some of the evidence, looks at possible causes and suggests action to reduce the risks.

The official view, expressed in the *Display Screen Equipment Regulations*¹, discounts any link between VDU work and pregnancy problems. However, the London Hazards Centre believes that results from major experimental and epidemiological studies show that the following factors associated with VDU work may affect reproductive health under certain circumstances:

- exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs)
- poor workstation ergonomics
- stress associated with work overload, lack of variety of and control over work by the worker

One possibility rarely considered by those investigating possible VDU-related reproductive hazards is that more than one factor could be operating at the same time.

One of the largest studies on the reproductive effects of VDUs, involving more than 10,000 workers, is being conducted by the US Mount Sinai Medical Center and the research and campaign group 9to5. The results, due in 1994, may provide important information on the risks to health of VDU work. In the meantime, we must assume that VDU work may increase the risk of adverse reproductive outcome.

Reproductive risks

Although miscarriage and birth defects are the risks most commonly referred to, there are other possible reproductive effects:

- menstrual disorders
- sexual difficulties
- infertility (male and female)
- problems during pregnancy
- spontaneous abortion or miscarriage
- birth defects

Menstrual disorders

A 1990 study of 3,500 women working in the Inland Revenue showed a clear link between stress at work and menstrual disorders, with VDU workers being the worst sufferers.

Infertility

In the UK about 10 per cent of couples trying to conceive will not succeed. However, little is known about whether this is due to male infertility, female infertility, or other factors. A three year study of 2,340 women by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that VDU operators were likely to have fewer subsequent live births after a miscarriage than those in the control group, indicating a possible effect on fertility or very early pregnancy loss.

Miscarriage

The suggestion that VDU work could increase the risk of miscarriage first appeared in the 1970's, with 'clusters' of miscarriages being reported in the UK, Canada, USA and Denmark.

The scientific community disagrees about the role of VDUs in miscarriage clusters, with many dismissing them as chance occurrences. If these clusters were unrelated to VDU use then we might expect to see a number of similar 'chance' clusters in offices where there are no VDUs, but as far as we know, none have been reported.

The reports that have caused continuing concern include both *experimental* (laboratory) studies — mainly on chick embryos, mice and rats, and *epidemiological* studies (of large groups of people).

Epidemiological studies

In 1988, researchers from the California-based Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Programme reported on a study of nearly 1,600 pregnant women over a two year period. They found that women who used VDUs for more than 20 hours a week during the first three months of their pregnancy were more than twice as likely to miscarry as those doing other types of office work.

A recent two year study of VDU workers at the California Department of Health Services of 1,900 women confirmed a 'consistent pattern of a possibly slightly increased risk' of miscarriage.

A 1992 study found that women exposed to VDUs which produce high magnetic fields averaging more than 0.3 micro Tesla (μ T) had more than three times the miscarriage rate of those who were exposed to fields below this level. The researchers concluded that exposure to a high level of extremely low frequency (ELF) magnetic fields from VDUs in early pregnancy is related to an increased risk of miscarriage, for a small, but significant proportion of VDU users.

reviewed, the effects of the magnetic fields were greatest during the very early stages of development.

Abnormalities and defects

Several reports have showed increased rates of underweight babies and of congenital malformations, especially of the heart, in children born to VDU workers.

Concern has been fuelled by a number of experimental studies which have shown that ELF magnetic fields of the type emitted by VDUs do affect the development of chick embryos. Researchers point out that any material or substance capable of a biological effect on embryo development in one species may also be capable of affecting embryo development in another species.

Protecting against VDU pregnancy hazards

The best protection for VDU workers who are pregnant, or wish to become pregnant is the *right* to transfer to non-VDU work when pregnant, or trying to

we make the following recommendations:

- ▲ Take regular breaks away from the screen — as least 10 minutes in every hour
- ▲ Where possible, avoid working for more than half the working day at the VDU — problems increase with increasing hours spent at the VDU
- ▲ Negotiate for VDUs that comply with Swedish guidelines for emissions² — or for liquid crystal display units which have very low levels of emissions
- ▲ Switch off the VDU when it is not in use
- ▲ Sit as far away from the screen as is compatible with visual and physical comfort — electromagnetic radiation emissions are reduced by distance
- ▲ Make sure that as a minimum, management implement the requirements of the *Display Screen Equipment Regulations*. These include the requirement to design jobs to reduce risk; assess workstations and remove risks.



Experimental studies on spontaneous abortion

A 1991 Finnish review of experimental reports confirmed that the type of magnetic fields which are associated with VDUs may have an effect on the embryos of chicks, mice and rats. The range of effects include fetal loss (or abortion) and development of abnormalities or defects. In several of the studies

become pregnant, if they wish to do so. Some unions have negotiated this right for their members including branches and chapels of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, National Union of Journalists, National Association of Local Government Officers and the Council of Civil Service Unions. These agreements allow for transfer without loss of pay or status.

To minimise the risk of ill-health caused by VDU work,

1. HSE *Display Screen Equipment Work*, HMSO, 1992, £5.
 2. Swedish Board for Technical Accreditation (SWEDAC), *Users' handbook for evaluating visual display units*, 1990.
- * *VDU Work and the Hazards to Health* £6.50. To be published by the London Hazards Centre in July 1993. ISBN 0 948974 11 7.

TRIS - use it or lose it!

Tenants' Resource & Information Service (TRIS) is an independent resource run by tenants for tenants. TRIS produces a regular Information Digest on housing matters and answers enquiries from tenants' groups. TRIS needs affiliations and support in order to continue its services. For more information write to TRIS at First Floor, 1 Pink Lane, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 5DW. Tel: 091-232 1371 or 091 233 0467.

Sign up for Summer training



The Hazards Centre is currently running a series of inexpensive, one-day courses designed to equip safety reps and anyone involved in workplace health and safety with the knowledge and information to bring about improvements in their workplace.

As well as focusing on specific health and safety topics, each course will cover the relevant new regulations arising from EC directives which came into force in January 1993.

10 June 1993:
Lifting and handling

24 June 1993:
Chemical safety and COSHH

8 July 1993:
VDUs and RSI

22 July 1993:
General health and safety regulations

The courses cost £40.00 per person per day.

Call to link occupational and community health services

There has been a long standing need to work towards a fully integrated health service linking community National Health Service (NHS) services with occupational health schemes. Trade unionists and primary health care professionals have worked together in recent years in Occupational Health Projects (Camden & Islington, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bradford and more recently Leeds and Birmingham) in order to take occupational health care concerns into the doctors' surgeries. Recently the Health and Safety Executive recognised the need for general

practitioners and practice nurses to get to grips with occupational health questions so that they can identify work-related ill-health. However, current services and training provision are still weak.

The Labour Party is trying to develop policy in this area through a Health Team Forum and an inaugural meeting was held at the House of Commons on 12 May. Further information on the Forum can be obtained from Ian McCartney MP, Labour Party spokesperson on the NHS, at House of Commons, Westminster, London SW1.

STOP PRESS — Court fines polluting incinerator company

In September 1992 the *Daily Hazard* reported on local residents' action against the Basic Energy-operated incinerator at Hillingdon Hospital. As we go to press, Basic Energy has just been fined £6,000 plus £6,000 costs, and its Site Manager and Managing Director given conditional discharges, for the failure to operate the plant within the law.



PUBLICATIONS

The London Hazards Centre will be launching its new book **VDU Work and the Hazards to Health** £6.50, in July 1993. This comprehensive handbook, which completely updates the Hazards Centre's highly successful *VDU Hazards Handbook*, will provide essential information for the UK's ten million VDU users on the potential hazards of their work, and how to prevent VDU-related ill-health. There is a special pre-publication offer: **VDU Work and the Hazards to Health WITH Protecting the Community — A Worker's Guide to Health and Safety in Europe** for a combined price of £10.

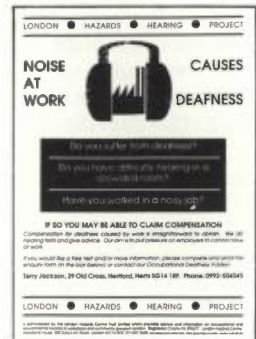
- ▲ **VDU Work and the Hazards to Health.** £6.50 (to be published July 1993)
- ▲ **Protecting the Community: A worker's guide to health and safety in Europe.** £9.95
- ▲ **Basic Health and Safety: Workers' rights and how to win them.** £6.00
- ▲ **Repetition Strain Injuries: Hidden harm from over-use.** £3*/£6.00
- ▲ **Out in the Open** (supplement to *Repetition Strain Injuries*). £1 (free with *Repetition Strain Injuries*).
- ▲ **Sick Building Syndrome: Causes, effects and control.** £4.50
- ▲ **Fluorescent Lighting: A health hazard overhead.** £2*/£5
- ▲ **Toxic Treatments: Wood preservative hazards at work and in the home.** £5.95
- ▲ **After the Sprayer: investigation and treatment of ill-health caused by wood preservatives and how to get help.** Factsheet. £1.
- ▲ **Asbestos Factpack** (People's Asbestos Action Campaign). £3*/£5
- ▲ **Factpack:** Set of factsheets from the *Daily Hazard*. £5.00
- ▲ **Daily Hazard** complete run: £25

* Price to community/tenants/union groups.

Prices include postage. Discounts for 10 or more copies.

HAZLIT is London Hazards Centre's library database. For information about on-line access, contact the Centre.

LONDON HAZARDS HEARING PROJECT



The London Hazards Centre has become involved in a new audiology project offering free hearing tests and legal advice to retired, redundant and unemployed industrial workers in London and the South/East, who now suffer from deafness caused by noisy working conditions. Working with Occupational Deafness Adviser Terry Jackson, who has considerable experience of this work, and local firms of solicitors, the project aims to assist individuals with compensation claims for noise-induced hearing loss.

Similar projects have been carried out by hazards groups in a number of different regions in the UK with considerable success. This work is part of a wider health and safety campaign to draw attention to the real cost of inadequate safety measures in the workplace.

For further information, contact the Centre or Terry on 0992-504045.



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