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Royal Mail Delivery - Musculoskeletal Survey Report:

To: All Branches

Dear Colleagues,

A survey of musculoskeletal problems, their impact on work, causes and possible solutions was carried out by Dr Corinne Parsons Royal Mail Group Occupational Health & Ergonomics Manager in 10 delivery offices using questionnaires and focus group sessions. In addition comments were received from several postmen and women as a result of a Courier article.

There were 401 responses to the paper based questionnaire survey from 9 delivery offices; Catford, Dunstable, Ealing, Newport Pagnell, Upper Holloway, Ware, Watford, Willesden and Warrington. Focus group sessions were held at Warrington, Watford and Ampthill delivery offices where feedback was recorded following face to face discussions.

The offices were selected to represent a mix of delivery characteristics and a range of performance for MSD related sick absence.

Questionnaires were distributed and completed during WTLL sessions and almost everyone present completed a questionnaire. The vast majority of respondents were delivery postmen and women (OPGs), there were a small number of drivers, callers' office staff, managers and DOM supports.

Most participants were male, just under 10% were female.

Ages were from under 24 to over 65 years, with the peak age group 45 – 55 years and a sharp drop off above this level.

There were a comparable number of participants above 55 years as below 35 years.

The most common delivery methods were shared van with a pouch or trolley and HCT walks. 56% of those with a shared van described their duty as a shared van and trolley or shared van with pouch and trolley.

Musculoskeletal Problems

- 68% of those surveyed reported pain or discomfort affecting their muscles, joints, neck or back, affected work and other regular activities.
- 77% of these had suffered from this discomfort for more than 3 months.
- 63% of these individuals said the pain was intermittent.

- 32% said pain and discomfort was constant.
- 21% said that they had taken time off due to aches and pains in the past 3 months.
- 63% said that their aches and pains were caused by work.
- 47% said that their aches and pain was made worse by work.
- 35% thought that their aches and pains affected their ability to work a great deal or quite a lot.
- 43% thought it affected their ability somewhat.
- 22% thought that they affected their ability to work very little or not at all.

Lower back, feet and knees were the most common areas affected as would be expected from sick absence data and other ergonomics studies. However, almost 40% of participants reported discomfort in their shoulders, and a significant proportion also reported aches and pains in the neck, upper back, ankles, hips, hands and arms.

Tasks contributing to musculoskeletal problems

Walking was the aspect of the work most commonly identified as the cause or contributing factor of musculoskeletal problems. Lifting, carrying pouches, going up and down stairs, standing for long periods of time, getting into and out of vans, stress/pressure and workload were also frequently identified. Carrying heavy bags and not using trolleys as a result of pressure to keep up with colleagues or pressure from management were causes identified. Excessive amounts of overtime and working days off were also considered a problem. Increase in workload was the most common problem identified. Absorption was specifically identified also. Other issues most commonly identified were an increase in the length of the delivery span and pressure/stress, "to get the mail out by any means". 4.5 hour delivery spans were noted by many individuals as too long. Work schedules described with longer days and 6 day weeks leading to week off after every 4 weeks were considered not to give adequate time for recovery by several participants. Footwear was identified as a problem in 2.1% of responses and during the workshops, better fit and more cushioning was considered necessary. Other issues raised were: Different work patterns, one day off each week not enough, change to a different duty and you are not aware of workloads. Poor working environment and conditions in Offices.

Older workers

The report identifies the impact of work and increasing age and some of the staff felt that they found the work harder than they used to due to wear and tear on their joints. They found the more physical aspects of the job harder e.g. climbing stairs, hills, carrying heavy items and getting into and out of vans. They also said that they felt exhausted all of the time and thought that allowances should be made to work slower as they got older. Others thought that the job had got harder, particularly in relation to the increased delivery span and pressure to increase efficiency and complete and that their abilities had not declined.

Report Conclusions

There was a very high response rate to the survey.

60% of individuals suffered from musculoskeletal problems that they thought were caused or made worse by their work.

The main causes of problems were thought to be the length of the delivery span, workload and pressure/stress. The new delivery methods were positive in reducing the weights carried but the benefit had been offset by longer delivery spans.

The most common changes that individuals had made to reduce their problems included not rushing, using trolleys, taking breaks, wearing their own footwear or insoles and having physio. Changes made to reduce problems to allow return to work included changing the delivery or delivery method, reduced span or indoor working.

The role of the manager was seen as important in helping people back to work. A genuine welcome back with a suitable return to work plan were seen as important by staff and managers.

The 18 page report is attached, giving more details.

The Royal Mail Group Head of Health has formed a National Joint Health Board and three sub-groups looking at Ageing Workforce and Musculoskeletal issues, Mental Health and Health Programmes and Initiatives. All groups have the involvement of the CWU Health, Safety & Environment Department and Postal Department.

Yours sincerely



Dave Joyce
National Health, Safety & Environment Officer