



Get a grip on safety

For more than a decade workers compensation claims for manual handling injuries have remained rock steady. Body Active Consultancy's **Nathan Deans** looks into why such injuries are an obstinate issue in Australian workforces.

Between 41 per cent and 42% of all serious claims for workers' compensation are for manual handling injuries - a figure that has not changed despite the many safety initiatives.

The prominence of manual handling injuries in Australian workplaces has prompted the Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC) to develop and ratify a *National Standard for Manual Tasks (2007)* and the *National Code of Practice for the Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders from Performing Manual Tasks at Work (2007)*. The aim is to provide a framework for identifying and managing hazardous manual handling tasks with the ultimate goal of injuries through initiatives such as training programmes.

Manual handling injuries have developed into such an obstinate issue in Australian workforces that government departments, such as WorkSafe in Western Australia, have even initiated comprehensive educational platforms specifically aimed at children (Planet ThinkSafe) and teenagers (WorkSafe Smart Move) in the hope of finally having some positive impact on manual handling injuries. To have the youth of Australia entering into the workforce having already developed the skills sets for identifying and managing risks within the workplace would be a massive advantage in addressing stubborn manual handling injury trends that have barely budged for decades.

Indeed, based on some long-standing developments by Worksafe Victoria, the Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities (HWSA) have initiated a nationwide Manual Tasks and Moving Objects campaign to reduce the risks involved in the loading and unloading components of the transport industry.

Despite all these initiatives and interventions the latest reports from the Department of Minerals and Petroleum (DPM) indicate that manual handling injuries still represent more than one-third of all reported accidents in Australian industrial workplaces.

As with all long-term initiatives, there is now a certain 'wait and see' element that must be endured. The youth initiatives of WorkSafe WA won't impact the workforce until they start filtering into the actual workforce, while the HWSA campaign is not set to be concluded until 2010.

Meanwhile, companies need to continue investing in their workforce by running programmes for workforce health management, injury risk identification, education and awareness platforms with

regular manual handling and working postures training workshops.

Ultimately, manual handling injury rates are not set in concrete and many initiatives and programmes have shown that they can have a positive impact.

Several companies that have employed consultants over the past few years have managed varying degrees of success in addressing their manual handling concerns and there is now a push to form ongoing partnerships with consultants to provide sustainability to their programmes and consequently their long-term results. In our experience there are plenty of companies that will present superficial and unsustainable programmes simply to tick a box and say they've addressed the problem. This approach will initially yield positive results but without strategic relationships and ongoing programme maintenance they are ultimately destined for medium- to long-term failure, both logistically and financially.

By investing in a Body Active Consultancy customised Workforce Health Management programme at the end of 2006, one client reduced their reportable manual handling injuries from more than 30 down to below 20 in 2007 and

a projected figure of below 10 for 2008. Similar ongoing programmes show a repair workshop with 2733 days (7.5 years) without lost-time injuries and another similar facility with 1269 days (3.5 years).

At one underground mining facility, key areas of high risk identified were lower back and knee injuries. Several interventions were implemented, including a simple boot trial that compared several workboots specifically designed for underground mining against the stock gumboot. The trial resulted in less aches and pains and discomfort of the lower back (26%), feet and ankles (30%) and knees (43%).

Physical activity in the workplace comes with inherent risks, and a certain inevitability of manual handling injuries in the industrial workforce of Australia.

By investing in the workforce and ensuring that manual handling training is kept up to date, that the workforce is well educated in risk identification and management, and that ultimately the health and well-being of the workforce is managed appropriately, positive impacts can be made on the incidences of manual handling injuries. ■

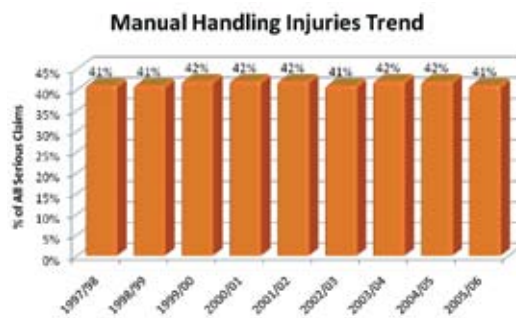


Figure 1: Manual handling Injuries expressed as a percentage of all serious claims. Source: Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2005–2006 (Australian Safety and Compensation Council).

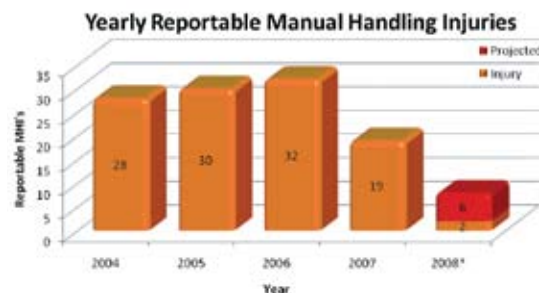


Figure 2: Yearly reportable manual handling injuries for an undisclosed client. Source: Body Active Consultancy.