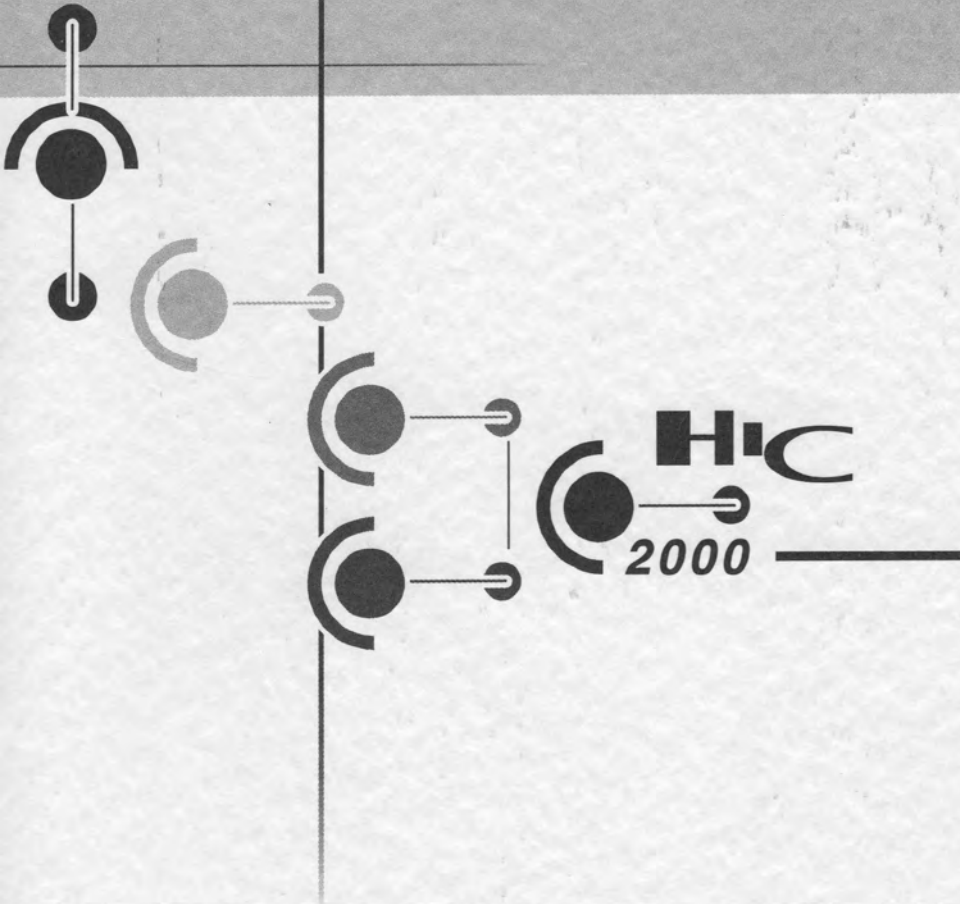


ZELMER

PROCEEDINGS



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Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) and computer use among NTEU members at Central Queensland University

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This paper reports on a pilot study of Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) and computer use conducted in March 2000 with members of the National Tertiary Education Industry Union (NTEU) at Central Queensland University (CQU). OOS is a musculoskeletal disease which results from ignoring the aches associated with repetitive tasks or the maintenance of constrained postures, particularly when associated with poorly designed or equipped workplaces.

By 1998-99 it was apparent that OOS and seemingly related stress problems had become major causes of lost work time at CQU. Anecdotal evidence to the author indicated that the problem might be even more serious with students in heavy computer use courses such as Information Technology, Information Systems and Multimedia. When a study requested by the University Health and Safety Committee was abandoned the Executive of the CQU Branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) authorised a pilot survey of members to initiate the process. It was anticipated that this might lead to further studies, particularly in collaboration with the Student Association.

A study such as this on OOS and computer use could not have been conducted 10 years ago as most academic staff did not use computers to a significant extent at that time. Technical staff were more likely to have used computers or typewriters ten years ago, but among the general staff as a whole keyboard usage has increased many fold. This study, therefore, is a preliminary snapshot of the result of roughly the first ten years of computer use among the staff of one university. Unfortunately, the responses appear to indicate significant problems which will only get worse unless staff change their work practices and working conditions are improved.

While some individuals have indicated to the author, perhaps in jest, that they were 'too busy' or 'too stressed out' to complete the questionnaire, a 22.6% raw response rate (n=72) was received for the three page questionnaire distributed to a membership list of 319 academic and general staff on CQU's several campuses. The survey results indicate that OOS and related issues of workplace hygiene are concerns for CQU staff, that many staff are unfamiliar with CQU's health and safety policies as they refer to computer-related work, and that OOS is likely to continue to result in significant lost time at CQU unless this situation is improved.

The small proportion of academics able to touch type (30.2%) likely indicates that a large proportion also have poor posture when using the computer. Individuals who are forced to watch the keyboard while typing, however fast they type, almost certainly slump over their keyboard as they work.

The personal health implications of the amount of time on a computer keyboard are significant. The industrial implications, however, are even more alarming. A working day is nominally 7.5 hours; the proportion of members spending more than seven hours per day using their computer for work is 22.2% for academic and 37.5% for general full-time staff. Almost all respondents indicated that the reported workload is typical of their normal duties.

Problems focussing eyes was experienced frequently or occasionally by 69.2% of respondents, headaches by 57.8% and lower back pain by 47.6%. Significantly, and somewhat as might be expected, only 11.1% of respondents reported experiencing pain in their non-mousing arm while 50% reported similar pain in their mouse-using arm.

This study was initiated because the author had a major computer-related OOS incident and anecdotal evidence suggested that there was the potential for a major computer-related health and safety problem at CQU. Unfortunately, the results of this study bear out the anecdotal evidence, suggesting that OOS and related stress illness will become an even more significant workplace problem in the future. The survey form and preliminary version of this report are at [URL: <http://www.zelmeroz.com/archives/2000/oos-pre1.pdf>].