



# Strategies to Decrease Risk: Musculoskeletal Safety Initiatives

## Background

Musculoskeletal injuries are common in the building and construction industry. Despite the mechanisation of many tasks, heavy and awkward work persists and often leads to soft tissue injuries to the back, neck and shoulders. Such incidents don't have the immediate visual impact of other injuries such as cuts and lacerations, bruising or fractures. Workers are also often treated by their regular GP off site and at a later date. All of this means that many musculoskeletal injuries are out of sight; however they should never be out of mind. These kinds of injuries often result in at least a couple of days off work for employees and can develop into chronic pain.

A reduction in musculoskeletal injuries has been identified as a national priority in the Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2012-2022. One of the Strategy's three targets to be achieved by 2022 is "a reduction in the incidence rate of claims for musculoskeletal disorders resulting in one or more weeks off work of at least 30 per cent" (Australian Work Health and Safety Strategy 2012-2022, Safe Work Australia).

A number of accredited companies are implementing initiatives that go beyond simple manual handling training, in order to reduce the number and severity of musculoskeletal injuries. The companies include Telstra Corporation Limited, Lend Lease Project Management & Construction (Australia) Pty Limited, VOS Construction and Joinery Pty Ltd, and the Dinmore to Goodna Joint Venture (D2GJV) comprising Abigroup Contractors, Seymour Whyte Constructions and Fulton Hogan Industries.

## Telstra Corporation Limited

Telstra sought to reduce the instances of musculoskeletal injuries through the launch of their 'Musculoskeletal Health Strategy' and 'Ergonomic Injury Early Response'. Telstra's 'Musculoskeletal Health Strategy' aims to assist

workers to understand how the task, the environment around them, their lifestyle and time demands can contribute to the risk of musculoskeletal injury. As one of Telstra's WHS managers stated "it is about looking beyond the task being undertaken and taking ownership and action to remove the risk to their health". The 'Ergonomic Injury Early Response' initiative is designed to prevent injury by intervening early and providing workers with strategies to change the way they are working and provide them with the right tools and knowledge for removing or reducing soft tissue injury risks. It will also allow injured workers to return to pre-injury duties as soon as possible.

Both of these initiatives are in the early stages of development and implementation; however what has been observed thus far is encouraging. Feedback from Telstra's workforce has been very positive, and the material and guidance has been described as "usable, fresh and relevant". The company intends to constantly measure incidents, injuries and return to work rates to establish if the desired reduction in musculoskeletal injuries is achieved.

## Lend Lease Project Management and Construction (Australia) Pty Limited

Lend Lease ordinarily manages musculoskeletal safety through its Environmental Health and Safety system (EHS) on a risk assessment basis. However, recently the company's New South Wales and Queensland Regional Business Units (RBUs) have begun their own local awareness programs.

The NSW program comprises an awareness session with a local EHS manager for all apprentices, construction workers, foreman and selected construction managers, complemented by a practical session with an industry-recognised occupational therapist. The occupational therapist offers practical sessions on movement and bending while undertaking activities, and on improving general flexibility and range of

movement. The idea is to give employees the tools they need to keep themselves injury free, which in turn should reduce injury rates.

In 2012 the Queensland RBU partnered with the Queensland Government in the 'PERforM Initiative', developed jointly by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ), the University of Queensland and the Curtin University of Technology. PERforM is a simple manual task risk management program based on participative ergonomics: an internationally recommended approach for reducing musculoskeletal disorders. The initiative provides a framework to help employers engage with workers at all levels to identify, assess and control manual task risks within their workplace. The philosophy behind PERforM is that workers are the experts at performing their own work tasks. A number of Lend Lease's Queensland employees have been through the training ready for implementation.

Lend Lease have so far found that all sessions in NSW received positive feedback from program participants. During the program participants were required to undertake a specific basic risk assessment of a hazardous manual task scenario. Results from a review of these assessments indicate a raised level of awareness on the part of participants.

### VOS Construction and Joinery Pty Ltd

In 2012 VOS Construction and Joinery reviewed its injury statistics and found that the majority involved "soft tissue" injuries to backs, necks and shoulders. In order to reduce the high number of musculoskeletal injuries VOS became creative and implemented the 'Back Care Sessions', a two hour presentation by an exercise physiologist who has previously worked with the Australian Cricket Team. The initiative provides a holistic approach which doesn't limit itself to focusing on manual handling skills. Regardless of such skills, if workers do not maintain a high level of fitness and strength—especially around their 'core' muscles—they can still suffer an injury.

VOS's presentation equipped workers with strategies for maintaining the 'curve' in one's back, something vital to preventing injury, along with daily exercises designed to keep the muscles that protect the back, neck and shoulders strong. Follow up one-on-one sessions were available for interested workers, with individual exercise plans devised.

VOS has received excellent anecdotal feedback from employees who had "niggles" here and there, with many stating that their pain has ceased after

they implemented their personal exercise program. VOS has also experienced a reduction in Lost Time Injuries (LTIs) so far in the 2012-2013 financial year; though more data will be necessary to determine the role the 'Back Care Sessions' have played in this reduction.

### Dinmore to Goodna Joint Venture

The Dinmore to Goodna Joint Venture (D2GJV)—head contractor on the Ipswich Motorway upgrade in Brisbane's west—conducted an extensive risk assessment prior to commencing work on the project. This risk assessment revealed that, based on previous experiences and statistics, the most common injuries suffered by workers of the joint venture companies were sprains and strains resulting from poor manual handling.

To combat this risk D2GJV chose to implement Onsite Health Solutions' flagship injury prevention program 'SafeSpine,' due to its previous success in the mining and construction industry. SafeSpine is a musculoskeletal health education program specialising in injury prevention and reduction. SafeSpine aims to create a positive workplace culture, a statistical improvement in injury figures, and ultimately a health and safety focused workforce.

SafeSpine initially involved a hands-on educational workshop to all on-site workers aimed at improving awareness, the understanding of safety, and the importance of looking after their bodies. Through the workshop 15-20% of the D2GJV workforce became trained SafeSpine leaders, able to lead daily prestart exercises called SafeStarts. The educational workshop has since been incorporated as a part of the mandatory site induction, setting an expectation to what would be best practice on site.

SafeSpine also involved 'specialists', two of whom were on site five days a week, to ensure sustainability components of the program (such as leader up-skilling, competitions, regular field visits, first aid consultations, night shift visits as well as injury risk assessments and musculoskeletal rehabilitation) remained ongoing.

The result of SafeSpine has been a cultural shift across the D2GJV workforce where, according to program managers within Abigroup Contractors, "the workers understood the importance of reporting a musculoskeletal concern or injury early, prior to it becoming more serious."

## About these case studies

The Australian Government is committed to improving the WHS standards for all workers on building and construction projects.

These case studies have been developed to share practical ideas that can be adopted by industry to assist in their own management of WHS issues.

The Federal Safety Commissioner consults widely with industry, WHS authorities and other relevant agencies to promote a cooperative approach to improving WHS performance.

**The vision of the Federal Safety Commissioner is a building and construction industry where no one is harmed.**

### For further information:

- Visit the FSC website at [www.fsc.gov.au](http://www.fsc.gov.au)
- Contact the FSC Assist Line on **1800 652 500**
- Contact the OFSC via email at [ofsc@dewr.gov.au](mailto:ofsc@dewr.gov.au)

The Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner has prepared this case study to promote workplace health and safety (WHS) in the industry. When developing OHS initiatives, businesses and individuals should consider the circumstances and requirements particular to them and seek professional advice where required.

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