



Chapter X

**Policies for the Prevention of
Repetitive Strain Injury
Among Computer Users: A
Moral Analysis**

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter starts with a very brief review of the nature of repetitive strain injury (RSI) and some of the less helpful advice about RSI. There is consideration of general issues of employer responsibility for health and safety and mention of the peculiarities of RSI prevention before attention is turned to the balance of individual versus corporate responsibility as shown in policies studied. Attention is then drawn to particular issues of mouse use and then computer games. There is a short discussion of the issues of stress and work pressure, followed by mention of some issues raised by monitoring, and the chapter concludes with a look at the issues raised by consideration of shared workstations.

REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY (RSI)

The increasing use of information and computer technologies (ICTs) means that an ever-larger proportion of the world's population is exposed to the possibility of RSI from computer use.

RSI is also known as occupational overuse injury or syndrome and cumulative trauma disorder, and in some cases terms such as work-related upper limb disorders, tenosynovitis, thoracic outlet syndrome, and carpal tunnel syndrome are used.

This chapter appears in the book, *Social Responsibility in the Information Age: Issues and Controversies* by Gurpreet S. Dhillon.

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There has been some controversy about whether there are injuries caused by repetitive strain. Some authors such as Lucire (undated) argue that RSI is “an epidemic of a new disorder ... made up of two factors: hysteria in the patients, and impaired medical perception of endemic symptomatology, with the latter a contributing cause to the former.” Yet attempts by defendants in RSI compensation cases to argue this are proving unsuccessful (Times, 1999), and research (Greening & Lynn, 1998) has associated RSI of the hands with damage to the median nerve, the major nerve in the hand.

RSI is most closely associated with keyboard use, and there are suggestions that keyboard use might decline, leading to a common assumption that RSI will decline as a problem (e.g., Richardson, 1999). There is also evidence, however, that alternatives to keyboard use can cause RSI in some cases. Mouse use appears to have been a problem for some years (Workers’ Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1996), and voice recognition has also been reported as being linked to RSI (Grimshei, 1999). If RSI is associated with technologies that can be expected to supplant keyboard use to some extent, the issues raised will be equally relevant when transferred to the new contexts.

BAD ADVICE

A fair proportion of advice about RSI that is available is out-of-date or poorly focussed. The “RSI checklist” (Hazards, 1993) suggests many things to check that are not of great importance or difficult to change (e.g., 3.d. Has it (the keyboard) a matt surface? or 11.d. Is there street noise?). The University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee (1999) similarly has as few as 26 words about taking breaks, as against well over 1,000 on other issues. The “RSI checklist” (Hazards, 1993) also gives no practical help on how to answer other crucial questions (e.g., 4.b. Is it (desk or working surface) at a suitable height? without any indication of how a suitable height might be determined). It was hardly suitable as the first linked piece of advice on how to avoid causing further injury in a web page (RSI-UK, 1998) for “Dealing With It” when first diagnosed with RSI, and thankfully appears to be no longer.

Many policies studied more obviously suffered from being boring, starting with a section on definitions which would put off many readers who were unsure whether the policy was relevant to them (e.g., University of Glasgow, 1993).

The Responsibility of Employers

Some “free-market” authors (e.g., Machan, 1987, p. 456) argue that there are no special rights for employees, that “As individuals who intend to hire out their skills for what they will fetch in the marketplace, ... Any interference with such trade (in labour) workers (...) might want to engage in, with consent by fellow traders, would violate both the workers’ and their traders” (employers’) human rights.” However, this seems implausible, as the negotiating positions of workers and employers are so unbalanced in most situations as to make the negotiation of fair

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