



## PRESS RELEASE

### NEW RESEARCH REVEALS SITTING UNCOMFORTABLY IS IMPACTING MENTAL HEALTH OF UK EMPLOYEES

A major new report\* published by Leeds Metropolitan University reveals a distinct and direct correlation between poorly equipped desks and musculoskeletal disorders, which can lead to serious longer term conditions such as mental health problems if not acted on.

Office specialist [Fellowes](#) commissioned the institution's Faculty of Health and Social Sciences to consider the attitudes of employees towards health and wellbeing of 4,664 workers who now spend a minimum of 6.5 hours a day at their desks.

This study highlighted that over 80% of employees reported suffering from ailments as a direct result of not sitting correctly whilst working at a computer, with one in five taking time off at an average of 14.5 days per sufferer.

The alarming results show that their long-term health and wellbeing is seriously at risk with the average employee suffering from chronic conditions and mental health problems from prolonged sitting at badly set-up workstations. This, combined with the findings that employees reported feeling unsupported in their wellbeing by their employers, also increases the risk of mental health problems.

Employees' well-being is certainly being compromised, with 18% having suffered from depression in the last 3 years (either minor or serious) as a result of their ailments.

And with more days lost within the UK from sickness absence due to musculoskeletal causes (ONS, 2014) than any other condition, it's of no surprise that the problem is escalating.

More than half (53%) of sufferers say their personal lives have been affected in some way as a result including taking a toll on relationships (21%). Some 13% cannot go out and socialise as much as they used to as a reducing stress relieving strategy, and where there is a long term absence due to chronic pain and depression in combination, returning to work at all becomes extremely unlikely.

Miranda Thew, Senior Lecturer in occupational science and occupational therapy at Leeds Metropolitan University, who produced the report, explains: “The results of the study present strong evidence that link mental health and chronic pain, in that one can be the cause of the other and that chronic pain can often arise from musculoskeletal problems brought on by poor ergonomics.

“Conditions arising from poorly adapted computer-based workstations range from sore muscles to chronic pain or carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive strain injury, eye strain, headaches and chronic fatigue. Such conditions can lead on to reduced quality of life and therefore further reducing capacity to work.

“By sitting in an unnatural position, or prolonged static postures together with repetitive movements can lead to a muscle imbalance, which in turn leads to neuropathic disorders and chronic pain.”

And it seems that company managers are demonstrating a flagrant disregard for health, safety and employee wellbeing.

More than half of businesses fail to carry out crucial workstation risk assessments, despite it being a legal requirement, which could easily address health problems from the early stage and prevent injury or sickness.

Increasingly, poor ergonomics and adaptation to nomadic working practice is worsening as employees take a more flexible approach to their working environments and try to adapt to their settings.

More than half (68%) use makeshift, DIY comfort supports or purpose-built ergonomic products with two thirds of these are the personal property of the members of staff.

More than one in 10 (16%) actively asserts that there is no support from the company to provide comfortable workspaces.

Simon Thorpe, a health and wellbeing coach and specialist, helps companies to examine morale employee welfare and has witnessed first-hand cases of employee health being neglected.

“Despite the proliferation of varying working styles, progress is not been made in terms of valuing the employees’ health and wellbeing. Employers are routinely not providing workforces with appropriate ergonomics training, workstations, chairs, and lighting within all the contexts that the employee is working within.

“It is therefore particularly prudent, in light of an improvement in the economy, that strategies to tackle potential increases in sickness absence from problems such as depression and chronic pain are introduced; especially to prevent a healthy productive employee either falling ill or leaving to join a company that shows greater interest in their welfare.”

Away from the health and wellbeing issue, the financial cost to businesses is more than £7 billion.

Louise Shipley, from office specialists Fellowes, said: “Workplace ergonomics plays a major role in enabling employees to perform their function to the best of their ability. It is vital that businesses recognise these facts and take steps to ensure this doesn’t affect their physical and mental health or productivity.”

“These new findings are alarming and reflect the true scale of the problems associated with working in an office or at a desk. Creating a comfortable, healthy and productive environment is not a big investment for companies of all sizes and is easy to implement.”

“Employees are working harder than ever before and are far more motivated when employers demonstrate an interest and investment in their wellbeing. Although there has been a fall in the overall rates of sickness absence in recent years, the rate for musculoskeletal conditions, mental health problems, such as stress and depression, has increased.”

“And that’s why Fellowes is offering free working well days to businesses wishing to reduce the amount of sickness days in the workplace to get the nation working well again.

“By the employer demonstrating an interest in someone’s health, whether it is at home, or at a company desk, the employee feels valued, and this is a major factor in employee health that can positively affect a business’s bottom line.”

To find out if you have any potential risk areas at your workspace, wherever that may be, take the simple Fellowes workstation risk assessment at [www.ergo.fellowes.com/en/workstation-assessment](http://www.ergo.fellowes.com/en/workstation-assessment)

**Working Well Days entail:**

- An onsite workstation risk assessment for employees by a DSE Qualified Assessor
- The 4 zone approach to the Complete Workstation Solution
- A pro-active prevention plan
- Workplace diagnosis charts
- Fact file on Health and Well-Being in the workplace
- Product showcase of latest ergonomic solutions - and its impact on business
- FREE information leaflets, posters and videos.

## **Notes to editors**

*\*The Risks to the 'Nomadic' Worker of Poor Ergonomics, May 2014. Author: Miranda Thew, Senior Lecturer in occupational science and occupational therapy at Leeds Metropolitan University. A Analysis of the impact of Independent Market Research commissioned by Fellowes.*

### **Biographies:**

#### **Miranda Thew**

Miranda is currently the Course Leader for the MSc Occupational therapy (pre-reg) programme at Leeds Metropolitan University. She devised a model for Role Emerging Placements the first in England for a full cohort of students, and is lead editor of an international book on role emerging practice.

Her research is concerning the impact of REPs on student learning and future practice. She is also lead editor on a book concerning lifestyle management.

Miranda also regularly contributes to the university staff development/ well-being programmes on lifestyle, in particular sleep, fatigue and stress management. She regularly presents at local and National conferences and has facilitated CPD workshops for occupational therapists particularly in scoping new fields for occupational therapy practice and applying business and entrepreneurial skills to the OTs skills portfolio.

#### **Simon Thorpe**

Formerly an accomplished athlete and Co-founder of the Expressions Partnership Simon's client focus centres on meaningful improvements and outcomes. Simon is active, qualified and experienced in motivational interviewing, cognitive behaviour coaching, facilitation, mentoring and delivering learning and development solutions. With this focus Simon has designed and delivered coaching, learning and development to individuals, teams and organisations in a range of settings - government agency, commerce, health, retail, sports, fitness and rehabilitation at local, regional, national and international levels. Awarded a national scholarship in 1995 Simon continued his studies at the University of Florida.

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