



Ergonomics

Real People Real Problems Real Solutions

Workers' Stories

Walter Frazier

Walter Frazier hurts...badly.

The 41-year-old Harbeson, Delaware man has severe, disabling injuries. He, and his doctors agree on the cause: working at a fast-moving conveyor belt in a chicken processing plant.

For nearly nine years Mr. Frazier worked as a “live-hanger” at the plant. An admittedly nasty job, live-hanging is simple in concept. Ten to twelve people stand beside a processing line, stretch over a barrier bar designed to contain the often flapping chickens, grab the chickens by the legs, and then stretch upward while twisting to hang the chickens on equally fast moving overhead shackles.

He and his co-workers each repeat this process about once every three seconds...that’s about 10,000 times a day or 50,000 times a week or 2.5 million times a year.

Mr. Frazier felt the initial pains in his hands shortly after beginning to work at the plant. Through the years his pain has intensified while his health has diminished. Finally, last year, barely able to lift 20 pounds and unable to perform many daily household chores, he agreed with his doctor’s recommendations and had the first of three surgeries in an attempt to repair his damaged hands. In addition to severe hand problems, Mr. Frazier has lower back pain, and severe and chronic arthritis in his hands and shoulders.

Part of his day is now spent in physical therapy designed to replace the lost range of motion and strength in his hands. Unable to work as a “live hanger,” Mr. Frazier was initially assigned to pull gizzards out of just-killed birds, but even that proved too difficult. Now, he has been reassigned to a job where he simply weighs already removed gizzards.

The cost of these work-related musculoskeletal problems to Walter Frazier has been enormous. He’s lost wages, he’s upset that his job affects his health, and his quality of life away from work has steadily degenerated.

His employer has not gone unscathed either. In the past few years Mr. Frazier has been out of work nearly seven months because of his injuries.

Amazingly, his story is not unique. “Everyone who’s a live-hanger at the plant has the same problems,” he says. “We all have damaged bodies. We all hurt like hell...and we always will.”



Beth Piknick

Beth Piknick, a registered nurse and member of the Massachusetts Nurses Association, knows first hand the importance of OSHA's proposed Ergonomics Program Standard. While working as an ICU nurse, she suffered a career-ending back injury that was devastating, both personally and professionally. Because this injury was preventable, she is determined to make sure that what happened to her does not happen to others. She believes the proposed OSHA standard is a step toward that goal.

Throughout her career Ms. Piknick helped patients move from their beds to chairs and back. Twisting, bending, pulling and pushing were all part of the job. She never had any back problems. But on February 17, 1992 while helping move a patient, Ms. Piknick severely injured her back. Physicians, surgeons, and physical therapists were not able to relieve the constant pain. Finally, two years after the injury Ms. Piknick had spinal fusion surgery coupled with major rehabilitation. She was willing to go through whatever pain it took to return to the job she loved.

But despite the surgery and physical therapy, she cannot return to her job. She cannot stand for long periods of time without support. She cannot lift or do any repetitive bending or twisting motions. She has been relegated to a light duty job performing tuberculosis surveillance. The loss of her job sent her into four and a half years of severe clinical depression. Her family has not only had to cope with her physical problems but her psychological ones as well. She says it was horrendous, and seven years later she is just starting to adjust.

Before her injury, Ms. Piknick was an active person who enjoyed bicycling, racquetball, waterskiing and yearly whitewater rafting trips with her family. Now, she cannot join in any of those activities.

Ms. Piknick knows now that her injury could have been prevented. Like most nurses, she assumed that lifting was just part of the job. She did not know that there were lifting devices commercially available at the time. The hospital now has them available.

She says health care workers continue to face an increasingly hazardous work environment in which they put their health, and sometimes their lives, at risk. Once this OSHA standard is in place, health care facilities will develop back-injury prevention programs that will involve frontline health care workers. Engineering controls, like lifting devices, must be the primary means of prevention, she believes.

If this standard had been in place in 1992, Ms. Piknick says she would still be living the active life that she once did. She would no longer be in pain while standing, and she would still be working at the job she loves, caring for patients.

Debra Teske

Since 1989, Debra Teske has been a telephone service representative handling customer complaints, selling telephone service plans and answering questions about telephone service. She first experienced discomfort from repetitive motion as a clerk, before she took on the more demanding service representative job. In 1995, she was diagnosed with bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome and had surgery in her right hand.

After the surgery, she returned to work, but the company made no changes in her work or her work station. Later in 1995, Ms. Teske was promoted to a job that required much less keyboarding, but in 1998 her job changed, and she returned to intensive keyboarding and mouse use. No ergonomic adjustments were made, and she has suffered further damage.

Recently, the company purchased better chairs and moved the mouse and keyboard to the same level, but Ms. Teske's job still requires intensive keyboarding that is adversely impacting her health.

Today, she has difficulty cooking, cleaning and picking up small objects. She can no longer kayak or bike. She can write for only short periods of time. Her only option to avoid further damage is to take a lower paying job since her employer has no plans to modify her present work.