

BULLETIN

HSA secures compensation for ergonomic injury

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ntonieta Xavier wants to talk about her injured right hand. Not to complain, even though the doctors say it is permanently damaged. Nor to brag, even though she successfully persevered with a challenging WCB claim, eventually winning on an appeal.

No, Xavier, a community mental health worker with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, wants to share her story so other HSA members can learn from it.

She hopes that her experience can help others understand, and act on, their rights to protection and redress with workplace injuries.

Xavier injured her hand in the spring of 2006 during a mandatory two-day computer training session, set up by her employer to orient staff to a new computer system.

Xavier had very little computer background and was not accustomed to regular computer use. The training was organized as two eight-hour days ... a format she says contributed to her injury.

-Within the first four hours my right hand really hurt. I told my boss who said if you cant, you cant. I stopped the training but stayed at work, doing other things. The next day I attempted to do more training. We needed to maximize the training because we had closed the centre for two days, and we were going to have a competency test the following week to see if we could use the system," she says.

-The technical staff came and realized my computer was not set up properly. They brought in someone who did ergonomics and she ordered me an ergonomic chair and a better keyboard. But still, within four hours I couldnt do any more."

At that point, Xavier took a step that is essential with workplace injuries: although she didnt miss any work, she reported the injury to her doctor, who sent in a WCB report right away.

-Thats what I want to tell people. Even if you think its very small, report it right away. If theres a lapse of time they can say there are other things that contributed to it," says Xavier.

Xavier was diagnosed with Activity Related Soft Tissue Disorder (ASTD). Although ergonomics, careful work habits, and exercise can help, her hand will never completely heal.

After she was injured, she received help from a physiotherapist from the Prevention, Early Active Return-to-

work Safety (PEARS) program, of the Occupational Health and Safety Agency for Healthcare (OHSAH). An occupational therapist ... employed as a Musculoskeletal Injury Prevention (MSIP) advisor ... helped with equipment and workplace set-up, and she received treatment from a physiotherapist with the PEARS program.

Xavier says the services were excellent, but understaffed and under-publicized. -All this is available to the membership but its not advertised, because they dont have many people on staff," she says.

-My colleagues dont know about the PEARS program. Theres only one-and-a-half positions for the whole Vancouver Coastal Mental Health. Its very inadequate for such a big organization. If it was advertised, people would ask for it, and then theyd be overwhelmed."

Xavier has made a point of letting colleagues know about the services available.

-Ever since my injury, everyone is asking for the MSIP advisor to come adjust their seats and workstations," she says. She is gratified that colleagues are doing this.

-Its a right," she says. But she believes ergonomic assessment and adjustment ought to be taking place automatically, as a routine safety feature. The employer, she says, needs to take more of a leading role in injury prevention.

-I passed out photocopies from my physio [about workstation configuration and healthy computing habits], but I think its the employers duty to do this."

While treatment for her injury was ongoing, WCB disputed her claim. Xavier turned to HSA. Sarah OLeary, HSAs senior labour relations officer specializing in WCB claims, took on the case.

-We appealed, and we won," says Xavier. -One reason was the research Sarah did. She found an article saying that it isnt the people who grew up with computers or use them all the time but rather people like me, who never typed and never used computers, and then suddenly get exposed for a few hours without proper positioning, who get injured.

-This was important because a lot people who use computers all the time were somewhat flabbergasted, saying, well then, why arent we all getting injured?"

Antonieta Xavier Community mental health worker Vancouver Community Mental Health Services
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Xavier says she suspects there are many other people with similar injuries, but who may not fully understand what happened to them or what they can do about it. -I bet Im not the only one whose hand has been damaged; but maybe Im the only one who reported it," she says.

Xavier stresses that every single workplace injury should be reported to WCB, even when it seems unlikely a claim will go anywhere.


-Ive heard people saying dont bother to do a WCB claim because they will turn it down. But then why are we paying WCB?" she asks rhetorically.

Xavier says her main motivation in persevering with the WCB claim was her sense of social justice and her desire to set a helpful example for others.

-My goal was not to get money from WCB or get time off. My goal was to indicate that they really need to protect their employees and get organized before they do anything that might hurt people."

These same qualities are what motivate her in her work. As a community mental health worker with a focus on youth, she works in schools, community health centres and hospitals, working one-on-one with children and

teens, meeting with their parents, and running groups for youth with mental health disorders ranging from autism spectrum to psychoses to anxiety disorders.

Xavier says that she has the financial stability to take early retirement, but has chosen not to. -People ask me why I keep working. I do it because I am needed here. I love the children. I think its really important to contribute to society." 

If WCB / WorkSafe denies your claim, HSA has experts to assist in your appeal. Also see -Tips for safe computing".

Tips for safe computing



he bad news is that computer use can be very hard on users bodies, leading to often painful ... and sometimes permanent ... damage to hands, wrists, backs, legs, neck, and eyes.

The good news is that proper design and use of your computer workstation helps prevent such injuries. Many research studies showing a significant decline in computer-related injuries when proper ergonomic principles are followed.

Safe computer usage involves consideration of the workstation layout, the equipment used, and the posture and habits of the user. This is an issue where consultation with an expert can be invaluable, but everyone can benefit from knowing some basic guidelines:

- **Screen** should be placed so top line of text on the screen is at, or is slightly below, eye level (when user is looking straight ahead) Screen should be directly in front of the user, not placed or angled to the side Sit approximately an arms length from the screen. A document holder should be positioned at the same viewing distance and height as the computer screen.
- **Keyboard** should be directly in front of you at a height that keeps your hands, wrists and elbows parallel to the floor. Wrists should not be bent at any angle ... not up, down, or to either side ... while working. Elbows should be at a 90 ... 110 degree angle. Don't use unnecessary force in keyboarding. A good-quality adjustable keyboard tray is often far more effective than an "ergonomic" keyboard.
- **Mouse** should be at the same height and as close as possible to your keyboard. Keep your wrist straight when you use your mouse. Don't hold your mouse too tightly.
- **Chair** height should be adjusted so there is little or no pressure on your legs from the edge of the seat. The lower part of the backrest should support the lumbar curve of your lower back. The centre of the backrest should be at the base of your ribcage. Feet should be flat on the floor with the thighs parallel to the floor. A footrest can be used to accomplish this position
- **Workstations used by more than one person** or for a variety of tasks should have adjustable components, such as monitor stands, keyboard supports, chairs, footrests, and work surfaces.
- **Take regular breaks.** Even micro-breaks of 20 seconds to two minutes can make a big difference.
- **Learn and practice simple exercises** for the hands and wrists, neck and shoulders, eyes, back and hips. Change body positions frequently.
- Ensure you have adequate **lighting**. Avoid glare by positioning lighting strategically. Don't sit with your back to a window.

The above guidelines are widely accepted for generic workplaces. However, your workstation may be unique or unusual compared with standard office setups. If you have any concerns about your workstation setup, contact your occupational health and safety steward and ask about obtaining an ergonomic assessment.

Information for this article was compiled from

- booklet *How to Make Your Computer Workstation Fit You*, published by Worksafe BC:

www.worksafebc.com

- Harvard University Environmental Health and Safety website: www.uos.harvard.edu/ehs/
- Cornell University ergonomics website: ergo.coman.cornell.edu/ergoguide.html

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