

# VIDEO VIEWS

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THE VDT COALITION

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September/October, 1986

## VDT Conference in Stockholm

### International Concern About VDT Use



Swedish Minister of Labor, Anna-Greta Leijon, addresses international conference.

"People are apprehensive and their apprehensions deserve to be taken very seriously." These remarks by Swedish Minister of Labor Anna-Greta Leijon opened the "International Scientific Conference — Work With Display Units" held in Stockholm in May. The conference, organized by the Swedish Board of Occupational Safety and Health and co-sponsored by their U.S. counterpart, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), was attended by 1200 people from around the world. Researchers from government, universities, international organizations, industry and unions presented over 300 papers covering topics ranging from stress and ergonomics to reproduction.

According to conference participant Robin Baker of the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program, "Although controversy remained on a number of issues, most notably reproductive effects, there was remarkable agreement among researchers from around the world that VDT work can cause health and safety problems and that these problems can be alleviated by following commonly accepted ergonomic principles of work station design and humane job organization."

The vast majority of papers dealt with musculoskeletal and visual problems, linking health complaints to poor workstation design. Researchers from such organizations as the World Health Organization, Swedish Board of Occupational Safety and Health and NIOSH presented recommendations for alleviating these health problems. The guidelines cover such topics as furniture placement and design, character size, display quality, keyboard layout and operator posture. (See box on page 3).

Some researchers announced findings that suggest new potential problem areas for VDT operators. For example, in Australia, repetitive motion was associated with an alarmingly high incidence of "repetitive strain injuries," such as tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome. A University of Florida scientists warned of the health problems associated with prolonged sitting and subsequent blood pooling in the legs. And a number of Scandinavian papers focussed on cases of dermatitis among VDT users that may be explained by VDT-generated static fields or excessively dry air in the office environment.

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## Cal/OSHA Acknowledges VDT Risks

On August 21, Cal/OSHA Standards Board voted to establish an ad-hoc committee to determine the necessity for statewide VDT health and safety standards. The 4 to 3 vote took place at the monthly Standards Board meeting in Sacramento.

"The vote is a recognition of the health problems that VDT workers are reporting daily throughout the state," said Larkie Gildersleeve of the Northern California Newspaper Guild, Local 52. "This is an important first step toward winning health and safety protection for California's VDT workers."

The Cal/OSHA vote came in response to petitions submitted in January by the Bay Area Typographical Union, Local 21, Communications Workers of America, Local 11576, and the Northern California Newspaper Guild, Local 52. These petitions requested the establishment of standards requiring proper workstation design, rest breaks and eye exams for VDT users in California. Since 1983, members of the VDT Coalition have lobbied for VDT legislation. When legislation attempts failed, unions turned to Cal/OSHA requesting establishment of statewide standards.

"Now that Cal/OSHA has accepted responsibility for VDT health and safety standards for the State, we hope to see some progress toward protecting California's workers," stated John Engwall, president of CWA, Local 11576. "We will continue to work with Cal/OSHA to insure a thorough and speedy review of this important matter."

In addition to the petitioners, unions attending the meeting to express their support included Office and Professional Employees, Local 29; United Auto Workers, District 65; California State Employees Association, Teamsters, 2707; and 9 to 5. While pleased at Cal/OSHA's decision, unions recognized that the Cal/OSHA

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# Sweden Conference

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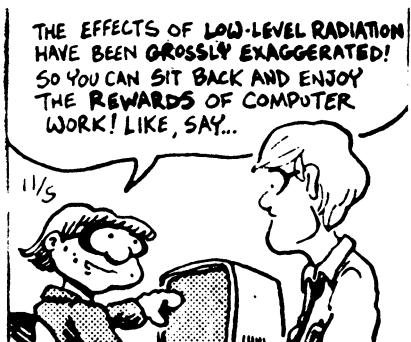
There was near unanimous consensus that high levels of stress are associated with the intensive work and monotonous tasks that are characteristic of many VDT jobs. Dr. Lawrence Schlieffer of NIOSH presented evidence that regular rest breaks can reduce stress on the job, although he also warned that breaks may be less effective in minimizing stress if workers work more than four hours a day on the VDT.

Sessions focussing on radiation and reproduction generated the most interest and controversy. A number of researchers presented results from laboratory tests on animals and epidemiological studies of VDT users that indicated a possible relationship between VDT use and reproductive problems. Dr. Lars Erik Paulson of the Swedish Karolinska Institute discussed research linking changes in fetuses of mice exposed to VDT-like magnetic fields. During his formal presentation Paulson warned that his results were preliminary and more study would be needed before final conclusions could be drawn. However, in a subsequent press conference he recommended shielding and further research saying, "At this time we don't know for sure whether VDT work is completely safe or not." He also announced that a Swedish university research team intends to expend considerable resources replicating and expanding his study.

Over the last few years, Sweden has been in the forefront of VDT-radiation research and has usually acted more quickly than other countries to institute hazard control measures. Engstrom of the Swedish National Board of Occupational Safety and Health reported that Sweden intended to "look very favorably" upon VDT manufacturers who shield against magnetic and electric fields when making purchasing decisions. In her remarks, Minister Leijon said that in spite of the importance of further research, "We cannot sit idly waiting for the research findings to come through. If we really mean what we say about taking people's apprehensions seriously, we must also be prepared to take unconfirmed but suspected risks into account."

U.S. union delegate David Eisen agreed. In a statement signed by delegates David LeGrande, Communications Workers of America, Bob D. Matteo, Ontario Public Service Employees; Karen Nussbaum, 9 to 5, and Laura Stock, VDT Coalition, he wrote, "There is controversy surrounding

## On the Fastrack



the interpretation of these (reproductive) studies. We are therefore far from establishing that VDTs cause birth abnormalities. But the increasingly strong possibility that this may be the case makes it essential to provide adequate protections immediately."

At the conclusion of the conference, unions from the U.S. and eight European countries came together to discuss their reactions to the meeting and share strategies for achieving workplace reform. Union delegates from European countries expressed disappointment at the lack of attention to work organization and the larger social and economic effects of office automation. A delegate from Denmark stated that "VDT use is not a technical or scientific issue, but is instead one of labor/management relations. Our members don't only need an ergonomic chair — they need advance notification of work changes,

job security and participation in the decisionmaking about both workstation and job design." An Australian delegate agreed. "The conference placed," she said, "an over-emphasis on science as a basis for policymaking. Science is neither value-free nor infallible. VDT use must be examined in the larger social context."

In spite of their disappointment in its limited scope, the union participants concurred that the extensive agreement on ergonomic issues expressed at the conference validated the efforts of workers throughout the world to obtain VDT health and safety standards. Laura Stock, conference participant and coordinator of the VDT Coalition, stated, "The world-wide scientific agreement on the existence of problems and needed solutions is in sharp contrast to the situation in the U.S. where efforts to achieve VDT regulations have been repeatedly rebuffed on the ground of lack of evidence. In fact, it is now abundantly clear that the evidence and technology exists to eliminate most VDT-related problems."

U.S. unions vowed to use the information presented at the conference to support continued efforts to achieve VDT legislation. According to Jackie Ruff, Executive Director of SEIU, District 925. "We believe that legislation continues to be the most effective way to ensure safe working conditions for all VDT operators in all workplaces, large and small, and you can count on hearing of our continued efforts — in the policy-making arena, in public education, and, in bargaining." ■

## Cal Osha

(Continued from page 1)

process can be extremely lengthy; often years can pass before actual standards are passed. According to Pete Rockwell of the Bay Area Typographical Workers, Local 21, "If Cal/OSHA doesn't act quickly to set standards, we will be going back to the legislature to get some results. We don't need more study. We know enough already to set some basic workplace guidelines." ■

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**2521 Channing Way,**  
**Berkeley, CA 94720**

Excerpt from "A Review of NIOSH's VDT Studies and Recommendations"  
by Barry L. Johnson and James M. Melius — Presented at Stockholm conference

#### CONTROL TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

The NIOSH studies cited in this paper, together with research reports from other laboratories, provided compelling evidence of health complaints attributable to poor or inferior ergonomic designs of VDTs and their workstations. This led to the development of an initial set of recommendation to reduce or prevent VDT users' health complaints. A modification of these recommendations was provided to the U.S. Congress in 1985. The Institute's control technology recommendations are as follows:

(1.) Workstation design: Maximum flexibility should be designed into VDT units, supporting tables, and operator chairs. VDTs should have detachable keyboards, work tables should be height adjustable, and chairs should be height adjustable and provide proper back support.

(2.) Illumination: Sources of glare should be controlled through VDT placement (i.e., parallel to windows as well as parallel and between lights), proper lighting, and the use of glare control devices on the VDT screen surface. Illumination levels should be lower for VDT tasks requiring screen-intensive work and increased as the need to use hard copy increases. In some cases, hard copy material may require local lighting in addition to the normal office lighting.

(3.) Work regimens: Continuous work with VDTs should be interrupted periodically by rest breaks or other work activities that do not produce visual fatigue or muscular tension. As a minimum, a break should be taken after 2 hours of continuous VDT work and breaks should be more frequent as visual, mental and muscular burdens increase.

(4.) Vision testing: VDT workers should have visual testing before beginning VDT work and periodically thereafter to ensure that they have adequately corrected vision to handle such work.

#### RECOMMENDED RESEARCH

Much creditable research has already been conducted on the subject of VDTs. But, based on our experience, work remains. We believe the following subjects particularly merit more research:

- 1.) The effects, if any, on visual processes of longterm VDT use.
- 2.) The effects, if any, of VDT use on reproductive outcomes.
- 3.) Work-rest regimens and other appropriate job design measures to minimize psychological stressors, and musculoskeletal and visual strains.
- 4.) Workstation equipment designs to prevent musculoskeletal and visual strains.
- 5.) Design of VDT screens to reduce eyestrain.

#### Letter to the Editor

Dear Video Views,

The research director at 9 to 5 sent me your May/June issue. As an airline reservations agent, I found the "letter to the editor" very interesting and factual. The effort to obtain improvements in working conditions is an emotional and frustrating battle. For preservation of job security and peace of mind sometimes the only solution is not making waves and continuing to wear a sunvisor for eye protection from overhead light glare and purchasing a personal glare filter for the CRT. Often management's only answer to reports of these problems is — "they're self-induced; here's free aspirin."

— On request, name and job location to remain unknown.

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## Paper Highlighting the VDT Coalition Presented at International Conference

The VDT Coalition received international exposure during the recent conference: **WORK WITH DISPLAY UNITS**. A paper presented there focussed on the work of the VDT Coalition and the Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) in training VDT operators to participate actively in shaping VDT health and safety policies, from individual workplace design to the development of public policies.

The paper, written by Laura Stock and Robin Baker, asserts that worker education is an essential part of any effective hazard control strategy, but that currently, "most educational programs aimed at VDT users are corporate based and are designed more

to reassure workers than to educate them."

The paper uses the VDT Coalition as an example of how education can be used, instead, to empower workers by giving them the knowledge and skills they need to actively work for controls in the workplace to protect their health.

The authors warned that, "Scientific discoveries alone will not bring about improvements in workplace conditions and practices. For effective change to take place, workers and their unions must take an active role in seeing that the necessary research is conducted and that study recommendations are implemented." They note that, "Since the VDT Coalition first

started, a nationwide effort has emerged to mobilize social forces toward this end."

The paper can be found in the 2-volume Conference Proceedings now in the LOHP Library and VDT Coalition Resource Center at 2515 Channing Way, Berkeley. The proceedings are not generally available. However, some of the papers, including the one by Stock and Baker, are to be published later this year in *Selected Papers presented at the Conference on WORK WITH DISPLAY UNITS, Stockholm, Sweden, 12 - 15 May, 1986*, Editors: B. Knave and P. G. Wideback, North-Holland, Elsevier Science Publishers. ■

# CSEA Wins Grievance Against the State of California

*The California State Employees' Association (SEIU Local 1000) has won a grievance against the State of California Employment Development Department (EDD) reaffirming contract provisions requiring the installation of noise shields for printers and anti-glare screens when needed to eliminate glare. The following is a report from CSEA about how their union won this victory.*

You work for one of the largest state agencies in California. You can't eliminate the glare from the VDT they just installed on your desk. The noise from the printer is so loud that when it is running you can't hear a word anyone is saying on the telephone. And the chair you are sitting on isn't adjustable. Do you:

- 1.) Build a cardboard hood for the VDT?
- 2.) Buy dark sunglasses and set of ear plugs?
- 3.) Adjust the VDT's height by propping it on a phone book?
- 4.) Do nothing? . . . or
- 5.) File a health and safety grievance?

For employees of the State of California, Employment Development Department (EDD) questions like these are becoming all too real as automation of the agency reaches the half-way point. When completed, EDD will have 134 unemployment insurance offices, 21 disability insurance offices, 25 job order sharing networks, and 39 employment tax offices on-line.

"Dealing with the problems associated with the introduction of VDT's in an agency as large and diversified as EDD has not been easy," according to Peter Schiller, a job steward for the California State Employees' Association (CSEA/SEIU Local 1000).

"Our initial concern has been to try to educate staff about VDT health and safety issues. To do this, we've been working together with the VDT Coalition and holding worksite meetings in offices throughout the Bay Area. Where problems are identified we encourage employees to try to work cooperatively with local office management in resolving them. When this has not worked, we have been filing class action health and safety grievances. To date we

have won grievances in field offices in San Francisco, Hayward, Antioch, and South San Francisco."

In the Department's response to the grievances, EDD Deputy Director John Healy acknowledged the agency's responsibility to provide anti-glare screens and noise shields for any field office requiring them, reaffirming existing collective bargaining contract provisions.

Healy also indicated EDD's intention to comply with the VDT purchasing guidelines issued last May by the State Office of Information Technology (see Video News, vol. 2, No. 4, Spring 1985). Accordingly, EDD is now making ergonomically designed desks and chairs available to offices requesting them.

Schiller added, "Our main objective is to work cooperatively with management to identify and correct potential problems as each office is being brought on-line. We certainly have not resolved all the problems, but I think that we're headed in the right direction."

## LONG DELAYED NIOSH PREGNANCY STUDY OK'D

After numerous delays the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has received conditional approval from the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to begin the first U.S. government study of the possible adverse effects of VDT use on pregnancy outcomes. After vetoing the study in 1985, OMB reversed its position in June of this year and has permitted NIOSH to proceed with a revised research plan to study 2000 VDT workers.

NIOSH first proposed the study four years ago in response to several widely publicized clusters of problems pregnancies among VDT workers. Bell South, a regional telephone company whose employees would be the focus of the study, has argued that the study is poorly designed and unfairly singles out the telecommunications industry. While Bell South claims to be concerned with the scientific accuracy of the study, David LeGrande, director of occupational safety and health for the Communications Workers of America, said, "Bell South has done everything they can to prevent the study from being done."

Until now, the OMB has upheld Bell South's objections claiming the study design was flawed. But, after congressional hearings in which OMB was accused of deliberately stalling the study, they gave NIOSH conditional approval to proceed. Among the OMB conditions are the requirement that NIOSH obtain medical records validating all reported pregnancy problems and the elimination of questions about stress and fertility from the questionnaire distributed to the study population.

According to *VDT News*, Dr. Teresa Schnorr, the NIOSH study director, said that the deletions will harm the \$450, study but NIOSH will proceed nonetheless. Other VDT researchers outside of NIOSH, including Dr. Butler of the University of Michigan who is completing his own VDT reproduction study, agree that the loss of the questions about stress and fertility will make it difficult to get valid results.

Dr. Schorr expects the study to be completed in the fall of 1988.

### NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE

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