

VIDEO VIEWS

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THE VDT COALITION

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February/March, 1987

New Study Shows**More than 20 hours May Slightly Increase Risks of Pregnancy Problems**

A recent University of Michigan study of state employees has added more data to the on-going debate about VDT use and adverse pregnancy outcomes. Results of the study, completed in September, revealed a slightly increased risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes for workers using VDTs for more than 20 hours a week, while there appeared to be no risk to workers using VDTs for less than 20 hours a week.

Dr. Kelly Brix and Dr. William Butler, both of the University of Michigan Public Health School, began the study in 1985 with funding from the March of Dimes. Initially, questionnaires were sent to 5,739 female state employees who did clerical work. Of the 4,215 women who responded, 728 agreed to an in-depth interview. Women were asked about their VDT use, pregnancy outcomes, past pregnancies, job stress, smoking and alcohol use.

The study showed that of the 120 pregnancies among frequent VDT users (those who worked 20 or more hours a week) there were 26 miscarriages, or about 4 more miscarriages than would normally be expected. Professor Brix claims this "slight increase" represents an increased risk of "5% at most" to frequent VDT users. Among infrequent VDT users (1 to 20 hours per week) 145 of the 697 pregnancies resulted in miscarriages, which is about what would be expected normally.

While the computer manufacturing groups welcomed the study results and emphasized the apparent absence of risk to infrequent VDT users, labor groups questioned the results of the study and warned that these results should not be considered conclusive. SEIU and 9 to 5 issued a statement which calls into question the University of Michigan's conclusions.

According to SEIU, which represents some of the study participants, a majority of the pregnant workers designated as "infrequent VDT users" (20 hours a week or less) actually worked at the VDT 5 hours or less. In addition, the number of workers

New VDT Bills Introduced in California

The California Labor Federation is sponsoring two new VDT bills in the 1987 California legislative session. These bills were drafted in consultation with members of the VDT Coalition, representing unions throughout the state.

AB 378, to be carried by Assemblywoman Sally Tanner, would require CalOSHA to follow through on its decision to set up an advisory committee to investigate the need for VDT standards and report to the Standards Board by July 1, 1988 with recommendations. Such recommendations would deal with such issues as workplace design, vision care and restbreaks.

A second bill would set limits on the use of computer monitoring in the workplace and require employers to notify workers when monitoring is occurring. The bill would also prohibit employers from using monitoring data to set production quotas without consideration of external factors, such as downtime, response lags and client variability, which can affect production levels. In addition, this bill would require employers who intend to automate new offices to give workers at least 90 days advance notice in order to allow their participation in the automation process. Further, if such automation eliminates or significantly changes existing jobs, displaced employees

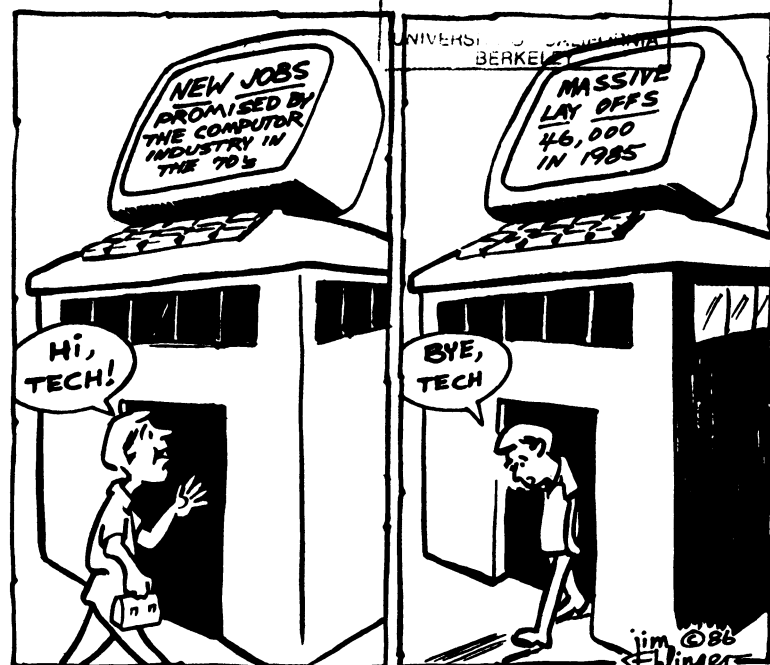
would be entitled to retraining, at the employer's expense, for a new position without loss of wage or job security.

Job displacement resulting from automation, an old problem in the manufacturing sector, is becoming an issue of increasing concern to office workers. "This bill would provide needed protection for people whose jobs are being displaced by new technology," said Pete Rockwell, an organizer for the Bay Area Typographical Union, #21. Rockwell was recently involved in a struggle to save the jobs of a group of skilled typesetters whose jobs were in jeopardy when computerized typesetting was introduced and typing became a job requirement. The union successfully fought for the right for existing workers to be trained in the new technology and retain their jobs.

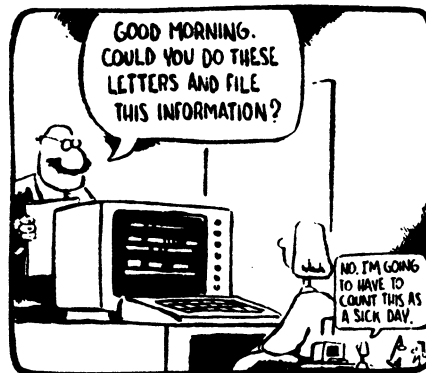
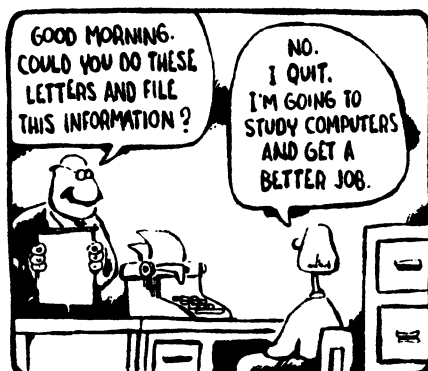
"This bill takes us beyond ergonomics by addressing the overall impact of automation on job quality and security," said Tom Rankin, Research Director for the California Labor Federation. "The most effective way to insure proper workstation and job design is to be sure workers have the opportunity to participate in the automation

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VDT Bill Signed by California Governor

On September 28, 1986, California Governor George Deukmejian signed into law a bill that requires each campus of the California Community colleges, California State University and the University of California to "consider human health, safety and comfort factors when selecting office equipment, including, but not limited to, VDTs, typewriters, chairs and tables. . . ." AB 4233 was authored by Assemblyman Tom Hayden and is the first piece of legislation relating to VDT use signed by the governor.

"Studies have shown that providing a workplace designed to accommodate the human body can increase productivity and reduce absenteeism and health-related complaints," said Hayden. "It is time that we take these facts into account when purchasing new office equipment."

According to Judith McCullough, representative of 9 to 5, National Association of Working Women, "while repeated attempts to improve the working conditions for VDT users have been made in the legislature, AB 4233 is the first bill to be passed that does more than just study the issue."

The final version of AB 4233 was considerably weakened since its introduction. An earlier version would have extended existing State Purchasing Guidelines, passed in May 1985, to currently exempt state colleges and universities. These guidelines are geared specifically to VDTs and require state offices to purchase ergonomically designed terminals and furniture when buying new equipment. The Hayden bill now allows institutions of higher learning to set their own guidelines.

Jennifer Lawrence, president of AFSCME 3211, which represents office workers at UC Berkeley, expressed concern about the limits of AB 4233. "We were certainly hoping for something much stronger than the Hayden bill as it stands in its final form." The bill, she said, doesn't specify what ergonomic guidelines should be followed. In addition, it states that the University of California will not be covered by the bill unless the Regents of UC adopt a resolution agreeing to follow its provisions. "Therefore, we will continue to look for real protection for those we represent, both in the legislature and as we go to the bargaining table this spring. The same forces will be lined up against us however — manufacturers and UC management — and that is a cause for concern." □

Women Have a Major Say in Designing The Work Place of Tomorrow

*Cecilia Tygesjo
Cartographer
Malmo, Sweden*

Cartography is one of many areas in which the computer is making increasing inroads. An area where this is especially evident is in drawing maps. In this field, where women predominate, CAD technology is rapidly taking over much of the work originally performed by hand. Today, maps can be produced by a fully automated process.

This situation recently attracted considerable attention in Malmo, Sweden's third largest city. The local government authority has embarked on a development project with funding assistance from the Industrial Safety Foundation. The purpose of the new project is to design the work place of the future drawing on all the benefits of modern technology to create a pleasant work environment, more interesting and stimulating job content and to encourage an improved, decentralized organization.

Many employees are participating actively in the project. About 40 people, the majority of them women, sat on three steering committees with responsibility for tak-

ing inventory of existing deficiencies and submitting proposals for improving technology, job content, organization and staff training. Proposals varied from the practical and down-to-earth to the higher flights of fantasy. These proposals and suggestions will form the basis for configuring the ideal work place of the future now taking shape in Malmo City Hall. The new offices will be evaluated by staff.

This project is unique in the sense that so many women, in addition to men, from the lower echelons of the organization played such an active part. Women were given the opportunity of having a direct say in the work place of the future. This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the usual pattern where men at the top of the pyramid determine the equipment to be bought and the way work is organized.

On completion of the project, reports will be compiled to disseminate the findings to other local government authorities in Sweden. Experience from the ideal work place should prove valuable to many other organizations using CAD technology in other countries. □

Dear Video Views,

I have been working in front of a VDT doing word processing, most of the time a good solid 8 hours a day. I started to get severe neck and shoulder pains and headaches. Also my eyes began changing rapidly. (I am 49 years old). I began to get angry, but since I couldn't quit my job I began to investigate. The table was too high — I got the managers of the business to cut the legs off the table. I got a typing stand. I raised the monitor to eye level with a large dictionary. I went to a physician and got a prescription for physical therapy — which incidentally turned out to screw my neck up even more. I will now go to my yoga masseur instead, though 80% of the PT cost was paid by my health insurance. I haven't dealt with my eye problem yet, as my insurance won't pay for an eye exam or prescription lenses. But I will have to go to the eye doctor at my own cost, even though I have new contacts less than a year old and reading glasses. What the literature says is true — reading glasses (or bifocals) are for 12" away — just wrong for VDT work which is often 20 inches away.

I have also asserted my right to take the recommended breaks, even though there is tremendous pressure on me to put out work.

All these problems are so terrible that I have redoubled my efforts to find work in my field (I have a masters in public health) — but what of those who really have no way out? Word processors are everywhere now. Not the least disturbing of the problems is the feeling of being a machine — one must put out more and more, faster and faster. The faster one works the more there is to do! Also there is no human interaction. As the literature says, the job changes drastically when one becomes "chained" to this type of machine.

Could I please find out what the VDT Coalition is doing? I feel like organizing the clerical workers of San Francisco into a strong union. I can really imagine doing something with this issue.

Name withheld from publication
at the request of the writer.

Reproductive Study

(Continued from page 1)

spending 75-100% of their work week using a VDT, as is increasingly common, was not sufficiently large to draw conclusions about this group.

Because the number of VDT users interviewed was smaller than the study team had originally planned, particularly among frequent users, the study was incapable of detecting anything but a very dramatic increase in still births and miscarriages among VDT users. A larger study, particularly of full-time users is necessary to detect the small increases in adverse pregnancy rates that this study may have missed. "It would be unfortunate if the public thought the case was closed based on this study . . . I want our study to be replicated and confirmed," said University of Michigan researcher Dr. Butler. "If this increase is real, it is of substantial public health importance, and it should be the topic of further investigation." □

Bargaining For Safety

- District 925, in its contract with the Association of University Physicians (Seattle, WA), won clauses providing transfer and/or retraining for displaced employees as well as training for employees applying for new job positions which require additional skills. If technological changes result in the creation of new job classifications within the bargaining unit, the employer must negotiate over the wages, hours and working conditions of those jobs.

- SEIU Local 500 (NAGE) and the state of Massachusetts have established a joint committee to review and make recommendations based on the impact of technological change on wages and classifications, career ladder realignment, health and safety, training and job redesign.

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1986 Legislative Summary

State Policies

On September 28, *California* Governor George Deukmejian signed into law a bill requiring state universities and colleges to establish guidelines for workstation design to protect VDT operators from injury. (See accompanying article.) The state higher education system employs 235,000 people.

Also in *California*, the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Standards Board voted on August 21 to establish an advisory committee to study whether to set VDT safety standards for both public and private VDT operators in California. No action has been taken yet.

In June, the *Maryland* House of Representatives' Economic Matters Committee sent a letter to the Maryland Occupational Safety and Health Board requesting it to consider drafting VDT regulations for both public and privately employed VDT operators.

Also in June, the *Washington, DC* Commission for Women issued a report recommending that the city government develop VDT purchasing guidelines, implement a public education campaign, and study the effects of VDT use in public and private workplaces in the Washington, DC area.

In *New York*, as of October 1, all new VDTs bought by the state must meet basic ergonomic standards, including detachable keyboards, displays that tilt and swivel, adjustable controls for brightness and contrast, glare reducing screens and filters, and non-reflective keyboards and casings. The standards were issued by the Office of General Services.

UC Berkeley School of Optometry Opens VDT Clinic

by Jennifer Lawrence

A new resource for VDT operators in the San Francisco Bay Area became available in the fall of 1985 when the University of California at Berkeley School of Optometry opened a special clinic to handle VDT related vision problems. The new clinic offers a complete eye examination including assessment of the internal and external health of the eye and glaucoma testing, as well as tests of eye and vision functions particularly used in VDT work.

Prior to their appointments, patients must complete a three page questionnaire detailing the make, model, and screen color of the terminal they use, the height of the chair they work at, the distance between their eyes and the monitor, lighting conditions in the office and symptoms they experience as a result of VDT work. With this information, the clinic provides a thorough examination for VDT operators by emphasizing individual environmental, or ergonomic, as well as physiological, problems.

Particularly useful is the clinic's emphasis on poor lighting and glare as a cause of

vision problems. In surveying individual workstations, the questionnaire advises the patient to turn off their VDT, and to describe the reflections seen on the dark screen. Is the reflection still visible when the terminal is off? What bright lights can be seen with peripheral vision? Clinicians frequently make recommendations for workstation changes based on responses to these questions. Additionally, clinicians advise patients on the use of adjustable copy holders, desks, etc., explaining the physiological strain improper equipment can cause.

The clinic has a complete workstation which can be adjusted to simulate the patient's own. A new prescription can be tested with patients eyes at their normal working distance from the monitor screen. Patients can also experiment with color tinted lenses which may help their vision of the colored letters on a screen.

Approximately 50% of the patients at the clinic have needed new prescriptions or glasses, according to Dr. Steve Parsons, Clinical Instructor at the Optometry

School, because standard prescriptions account for average reading distance and angle rather than the special needs of VDT operators. Ergonomic changes are also recommended for a majority of patient worksites.

The VDT Clinic is open two days a week between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Appointments can be made by phoning (415) 642-5761. The examination fee is currently \$41.00. □

New VDT Bills

(Continued from page 1)

Assemblyman Tom Hayden is also introducing a bill which would require any renovated or new state office building where VDTs are likely to be used to have adjustable overhead lighting dimmers and outlets for task lighting. These provisions would insure that lighting levels in VDT worksites could be dimmed to the lowest level recommended for VDT offices by the American National Standards Institute. □

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