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Conference aims to reduce injuries in healthcare workers

By Kevin Weeks, Oregon OSHA Public Information Officer

Architects, food service workers and computer workstation designers have an important role to play in how the healthcare industry in Oregon creates safer workplaces.

"We're looking at a holistic approach to ergonomics in healthcare," says Lynda Enos, RN, who serves as Chair of the Oregon Coalition for Healthcare Ergonomics. "Ergonomics isn't just for nurses or ergonomists, this matters to anyone in the healthcare environment or an industry that supports healthcare services. Ergonomics is about designing work environments, tasks and equipment to fit the physical and mental capability of the worker with the goal of reducing injuries such as strains and sprains and mistakes or errors. Think broadly: home health care, emergency medical services, nursing and other patient care services, administrative support services, housekeeping, laundry, food services, facility maintenance and engineering, healthcare architects - these occupations all benefit from understanding ergonomics issues in healthcare."

To hear about ergonomics success stories from healthcare facilities and organizations around the world, the Oregon State Association of Occupational Health Nurses and the Oregon Coalition for Healthcare Ergonomics will be presenting an innovative Healthcare Ergonomics conference, scheduled for July 26-28 at the Doubletree Hotel Portland Lloyd Center.

The purpose of the conference is to share contemporary, real-world solutions to reduce the number of health care providers and support service personnel experiencing workplace injuries. According to Workers' Compensation Division data for 2002, over 1,500 health care professionals in Oregon received serious injuries on the job that year, 68 percent of those from sprains, strains and muscle tears. Injury prevention is crucial to Oregon's healthcare sector.

Presenters from Canada, Australia and Denmark are scheduled to participate and provide a 'global' character to the 2004 Healthcare Ergonomics conference. "We're going to bring people together from across the country, and especially the Pacific Northwest, to share information and discuss 'best practices' approaches," says Enos. "Our participants and speakers will be sharing common problems and common solutions. We want participants to learn that they do not have to reinvent the wheel but can adapt successes from health care facilities in the United States and other countries."

"It's a great honor for Oregon to be the site of this innovative conference," says Peter De Luca, administrator of Oregon OSHA. "Our state continues to be on the leading edge of creating workplace safety and health solutions and sharing what we know. People look to Oregon for what is working when it comes to workplace safety and health."

So where do computers, architects and engineers fit into the Healthcare Ergonomics conference? "We need to take the opportunity to incorporate ergonomics when a new healthcare facility is being designed," says Enos. "Nurses and physicians are using computers and high tech medical devices more they ever have in the past - so workstations and equipment need to be comfortable and easy to use. If we're working on reducing and preventing injuries, we should get it right the first time and design in ergonomic improvements." Two ergonomics experts from British Columbia are scheduled to address ergonomic design topics during the Monday and Tuesday session of the conference.

Educating the public about healthcare ergonomics issues is a major goal of the conference. “Most people are not aware about safe handling issues for patients,” says Enos. “It's safer - for the healthcare worker and patient - to use mechanical equipment and devices rather than manually lift and move patients. We've been training nursing students and nurses' aides to lift patients manually the same way for over 30 years in the United States - using techniques that are unsafe for them and unsafe for the patient. We're trying to change public perceptions about patient handling and ergonomics in healthcare. If we don't change the core way that nurses are educated, it's going to be hard to make patient handling safer for caregivers and the patient.”

A common concern about ergonomic improvements is the up-front cost of converting equipment. “One of the biggest misconceptions is that implementing ergonomics in the healthcare industry is going to cost a lot of money,” says Enos. “That's another myth we want to break with this conference. Research from the past fifteen years in general industry shows you get a great return on the investment. Injuries are reduced and productivity increases. As ergonomics becomes more commonplace in healthcare facilities and work is less physically demanding, we also expect to see a reduction in nursing turnover and enhanced quality of patient care. Ergonomics does not have to be complex or expensive for a healthcare administrator to implement.”

Registration fees for the conference are \$225 for the Tuesday and Wednesday conference sessions. Attend any single day, including the pre-conference workshops on Monday, for \$125. Attend a half-day of the Monday pre-conference session for \$75. All registration fees include continental breakfast and lunch on the day of attendance.

The conference is presented by the Oregon State Association of Occupational Health Nurses and the Oregon Coalition for Healthcare Ergonomics, a partnership which includes Associated Oregon Industries, Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals Local 5017, Oregon Health Care Association, Oregon Nurses Association, Oregon OSHA, SAIF Corporation and the University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center.

Lynda Enos, MS, RN is a Certified Professional Ergonomist and Certified Occupational Health Nurse. Enos serves as the immediate Past President of the Oregon State Association of Occupational Health Nurses.

For additional information...

Registration materials for the conference are available in the Conferences section of the Oregon OSHA Web site, www.orosha.org/conferences. To register for the conference on-line, go to www.b-there.com/breg/hcergo. You may call the Oregon OSHA conferences section at (503) 378-3272 to register or find out additional information.

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