

## The Need for Ergonomics

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For some 100,000 sewing machine operators in the United States, common chores like lifting groceries, bathing, or performing their jobs is excruciating. Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), the UCSF School of Nursing, the department of community health systems, and the division of occupational and environmental medicine at UCSF, released a report Feb. 6 entitled, "We Spend Our Days Working in Pain," which documents how workplace conditions can cause permanent injuries.

Funded by the California Wellness Foundation, AIWA is an independent, private foundation that provides free screenings, physical therapy, ergonomic classes and basic treatment for work-related injuries. Since its opening in 1992, AIWA has had 500 visits and provided 250 classes on health and safety, and 90 percent of visitors are garment workers.

In a press and community briefing Feb. 6, immigrant garment workers and UCSF Professor of Community Health Barbara Burgel presented personal testimonies and startling facts about workplace injuries. Thirty-three percent of garment workers surveyed in the Bay Area complained of neck injuries, 48 percent complained of back pain and 23 percent complained of shoulder pain.

Three panelists explained how they suffered some form of musculoskeletal injury, resulting from repetitive work performed at high speed. The injuries come from bending one's neck too long over a 90-degree angle, over-extending the wrist, and keeping the shoulders raised for long periods of time. Garment workers report that bending the knees too much, twisting their hips at work, and long periods of sit-



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*Garment workers work an average of 6 days and 48 hours a week.*

ting worsened their condition.

Some of the findings in the report were alarming: 25 percent of those surveyed have trouble doing everyday tasks, 31 percent have trouble bathing and dressing themselves, 54 percent have trouble doing housework and 56 percent have sleeping problems. Moreover, garment workers work six days a week



*Musculoskeletal injuries are endemic among garment workers, and only 22 percent have health insurance.*

at an average of 48 hours per week. Most of these workers earn \$6.32 an hour — just seven cents over minimum wage.

Many garment factories do not provide insurance or provide adequate support for injured workers. The report shows that 22 percent of workers have health insurance, 12 percent have paid sick leave and 4 percent have paid legal rest — the rest do not. Although workers compensation pays for Medicare and temporary disability for wage loss, only one out of 100 attempt to apply. AIWA workers explained that many immigrant workers need assistance to fill out compensation forms, due to language barriers.

"Employers are legally required 'to care' by worker's comp insurance," Burgel said. "But, it's a confusing system for employers and employees and physicians."

Some workers will not report workplace injuries for fear of termination. "Nancy," a garment worker who asked not to be identified for fear of being laid-off, explained that she has been working in a sewing factory since she immigrated to America in 1993. She worked eight to 10 hours a day, and would come home exhausted, unable to do housework or even dress herself.

"Most factories don't have access to health care," she said. "I was afraid I would get fired if I spoke up. As a part of AIWA, I've learned many workers face similar health problems. I do not deserve to work in these conditions."

Burgel points out that these health conditions are preventable. AIWA workers, along with a research team at UCSF, have launched the ergonomics research/outreach project to develop practical, low-cost techniques to reduce injuries. Adjustable chairs, tilted worktables, footrests, kneepads and improved lighting and training are some of the options.

"Workers also need rest and stretch time," Burgel said. "We want to make sure they don't get fired or experience retaliation. We hope to have more Chinese translation to empower women to fight for their rights."