

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY: Ergonomics cuts down injuries at workplace

Published on: Dec 20, 2012 @ 6:22

New Straits Times, 16 December 2012

EXCEPT for occupational safety and health practitioners, ergonomics is still not widely known in Malaysia.

At a recent talk I delivered on the importance of ergonomics, a member of the audience asked me whether I had mispronounced the word "economics".

Ergonomics is about integrating knowledge derived from the human sciences to match jobs, systems, products and environments to the physical and mental abilities and limitations.

Ergonomics is an important facet of occupational safety and health (OSH) that needs to be optimised for the wellbeing of people at work.

Ergonomics is a relatively new field in Malaysia in comparison with Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, the philosophy, essence, principle and concepts of ergonomics are important and to disregard them would be a handicap in efforts to promote OSH in the workplace.

When ergonomic principles are not applied to the workplace, chronic musculoskeletal disorders -- such as back injuries, arm and hand problems, accidents and eye-strain -- may be common.

According to accident statistics reported by the Social Security Organisation, the number of accidents related to musculo-skeletal diseases increased from 14 cases in 2006 to 194 cases this year.

Industries suffer from tangible and intangible losses because of increased medication costs, decreased productivity, work quality and decreased worker morale.

It is well documented in other parts of the world that industries that implement ergonomics programmes report significant decreases in accidents, injuries, illnesses and healthcare costs over time, along with increase in productivity, work efficiency, product quality and worker morale.

The discipline of ergonomics is nothing peculiar to safety and health practitioners in this country but for the public, it is still difficult to sell.

This might be the reason why ergonomics is still considered an unknown science in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

But due to the widespread use of computers at work and at home, there is a need to educate the public on the importance of ergonomics.

In some developed countries, ergonomics is even taught in schools. For example, in the UK, the Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors has introduced ergonomics to secondary school students and teachers online.

The knowledge gap on this subject needs to be addressed by all the government, educational institutions, professional societies and the work industry.

It is timely for the media to show more interest in publishing safety and health information, including ergonomics issues, with input from like the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Malaysia.