

Interpreting Ergonomics: Are Ergonomic Interventions Necessary In The Sign Language Interpreting Community?

Steven L. Fischer, Department of Kinesiology, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON;
Kathryn Woodcock, School of Occupational and Public Health, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON

Introduction: Sign language interpreting involves both repetitive physical movement and sustained cognitive work. The interpreter may interpret in a wide range of settings, from classroom interpreting with deaf children, to business meetings, medical appointments and legal proceedings. An interpreter's income security depends on whether he or she is salaried or self-employed, and for the latter, on the volume of business. Some larger groups of salaried interpreters benefit from policies limiting exposure, but other salaried interpreters and most self-employed interpreters have no systemic protection from over-exposure to interpreting work. Negotiating the terms of employment, the interpreter may give precedence to financial need and the interpreting needs of the consumer over physical and mental demands. The purpose of this research was to survey exposure and injury prevalence amongst sign language interpreters registered with the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC) to work towards evidence-based recommendations to reduce/control/manage the risks of developing injury.

Methods: All AVLIC members were contacted through their quarterly newsletter and asked to complete an online questionnaire regarding their job demands, lifestyle, pain and discomfort, and current fitness levels. Participants were recruited from all across Canada resulting in a total of 316 respondents, over 50% of AVLIC's total membership of approximately 500-600. Responses were tabulated to determine injury prevalence amongst interpreters and to identify factors associated with any increased injury risks

Results: The average time spent with "hands in the air" or physically interpreting was 22.5 (± 10.5) hours per week, with 12.1 (± 11.2) of those spent interpreting alone. Of 316 total respondents, 21.2% said they had previously received a medical diagnosis of tendonitis/epicondylitis, while 12.7% and 12.3% had been previously diagnosed with arthritis or carpal tunnel syndrome respectively. The reported level of pain in the neck and right shoulder (on a 10-point scale) was 5 while interpreting and 3 at the time of completing the online questionnaire. Interpreters attributed daily stress levels mostly to time pressures (32.2%) or their financial situation (19.4%).

Discussion: From the high prevalence of previously medically diagnosed injuries in combination with the high level of discomfort felt while interpreting, it is evident that sign language interpreting can be a demanding task. Even though physical exposure averaged 22.5 hours in a week of work, interpreters reported pain lingering into their non-interpreting time. The stress of interpreting situations and the day to day stress of dealing with financial and time management issues may play a role in the rate of injury either by increasing exposure duration or reducing the recovery value of non-exposure time.

Ergonomic interventions must therefore focus on the psychosocial and administrative demands of the job rather than simply to signing techniques relevant to the time an interpreter has his or her "hands in the air".