



# Notes for the Shift Worker

Issue 3/2004

## Working Hours in the UK

The Working Time Regulations 1998 set an upper limit of 48 hours on average weekly working hours in the European Union.

In the UK individuals can sign opt-out agreements which mean that they are no longer covered by the restriction.

The European Commission is currently reviewing the implementation of the Working Time Directive and the UK Government is consulting widely on long working hours and the operation of the individual opt-out. This consultation will conclude on 22 September 2004.

## Working all hours leads to all round problems

Many shop managers and supervisors, under pressure to meet targets and boost profit margins, regularly work excessive hours that put their health, safety and family lives at risk.

The UK shopworkers' union Usdaw is building a case to present to Government on ending the UK's "opt-out" clause on working time regulations. The UK stands alone in adopting a policy allowing workers to "opt-out" of the European Union's maximum 48 hour week.

Udaw has long held concerns that its members, particularly managers and supervisors, feel pressured into opting-out of the 48 hour week, and then work excessive hours. The UK Government's own figures show that 4.5 million people (25 percent of the workforce) work more than 48 hours per week, with one in six workers putting in over 60 hours per week.

Udaw believes the Government's opt-out policy leaves workers open to exploitation.

It contends that adopting the 48 hour limit was based on an extended study of long working hours and accidents which demonstrated that the risk of having and causing accidents due to tiredness increased at a faster rate for all time worked above 48 hours.

## Quality time with your children

It has been estimated that the average working father spends about three minutes of "quality time" each day with his children. Working long or irregular hours can make finding quality time uniquely challenging, especially when other domestic responsibilities compete for your attention. You may even feel guilty about not being able to spend the amount of time you'd like to with your children. You may not always be able to control the amount of time you have for your family, but with a bit of foresight, you can make the most of whatever time you have.

### Quality vs quantity

Not all family time is necessarily time well spent. Many parents adopt the thinking that "more is better", when less can in fact be more. (Reading a story to your child may only take 15 minutes for example, but is a much better use of time than watching a half-hour television show together). According to well-known pediatrician Dr Benjamin Spock, it's important to find the right balance: spending as much quality time as possible with your children, but not at the expense of your own needs.

### What is quality?

According to Dr Spock, "quality time does not imply doing anything out of the ordinary. It is the accumulated day-to-day interactions, not dramatic trips to the circus." Quality time can happen anytime and anywhere. That's good to know if you happen to work a schedule that allows fewer opportunities to be together. Quality time can happen when doing the grocery shopping, eating a meal, reading a book, or any other activity where you are giving your children your undivided attention, regardless of the length of that activity.

### Don't overdo it

You might be tempted to overdo it by "spoiling" your children or trying to "bank" some quality time by spending long periods on one day, only to go several days with no quality time at all. Unfortunately, these tactics simply don't satisfy your child's need for quality time with you - or you with your child.

## Longer hours - more errors

In the US a federally funded study of 393 nurses who work fulltime has found that those who routinely work long, often unpredictable hours, such as shifts exceeding 12 hours, make more mistakes than those who work fewer hours.

Over two weeks 199 errors and 213 near-errors were detected, usually by the nurses themselves.

Most errors or near-errors involved medication, including the wrong drug, wrong dose, wrong patient, wrong method of administration, wrong time or failure to give altogether.

Errors and near-errors increased when shifts exceeded 12 hours, when working weeks exceeded 40 hours or when they worked unplanned overtime at the end of a regular shift.

The researcher concluded that nurses are no different from other occupational groups - "When they work longer hours, the risk of errors goes up."

# Summary report on US National Sleep Conference

The inaugural National Sleep Conference held at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland USA, brought together healthcare providers, public health and education experts, policy makers, sleep medicine specialists, patient advocates and others to look at opportunities for improving health and quality of life by addressing chronic sleep deprivation and its consequences.

The summary of the conference can be found at [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/meetings/slp\\_summary.pdf](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/meetings/slp_summary.pdf)

Final recommendations and proposed actions and implementation steps addressed the following:

- *Neurocognitive (Learning and Memory):*
- *Performance (Drowsy Driving, Work Accidents)*
- *Cardiovascular Disease*
- *Obesity and Diabetes*
- *Psychiatric Disorders*

There were several general themes throughout the conference, including that inadequate sleep has an impact on neurocognitive function and performance across all target groups and there is a link between Sleep Disordered Breathing and cardiovascular disorders such as hypertension and heart failure.

The recommendations of the five action group panels will be discussed and prioritised at the next Sleep Disorders Research Advisory Board meeting.

An implementation plan for the highest priority public health proposals will subsequently be developed.

These will be posted on the website <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/> when available.

## Tips for reducing stress before bedtime

Most sleep experts agree that it's important to establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine in order to reduce stress before bedtime.

A relaxing activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety that can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep, or remain asleep. Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like working, paying bills, engaging in competitive games or family problem-solving.

Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water (such as a spa or bath) before retiring to bed can ease the transition into deeper sleep, but it should be done early enough that you are no longer sweating or over-heated. If you are unable to avoid tension and stress, it may be helpful to learn relaxation therapy from a trained professional. Finally, avoid exposure to bright light before bedtime because it signals the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle that it is time to awaken, not to sleep.

## New study links sleep apnea and heart rhythm irregularity

A new study linking the sleep disorder, sleep apnea, and a common form of heart rhythm irregularity known as "atrial fibrillation" suggests that sleep apnea predisposes people to the heart rhythm irregularity.

People diagnosed with the heart complaint were twice as likely to have underlying sleep apnea.

## Emergency phone call sends operator to sleep

County police in Baltimore USA are investigating a report that a householder fearing an intruder was breaking in rang the emergency phone number only to have the operator fall asleep while she was describing the details.

A police department spokesperson is quoted as saying that they were not sure that you can train someone to stay awake!

## Renting a sleeping pod in the Empire State Building

A professional nap centre has been established in the Empire State Building in New York for stressed and tired office workers.

People can stretch out on a contraption termed a "metronap pod", draw a dark visor over their head and shoulders and snooze until wakened gently by soft music. A 20 minute nap costs US\$14. If you want one for the home they cost almost US\$8,000.

## Longer pregnancies for working women at night

A new Danish study has found that women who worked night shifts only, had a higher risk delivering past their due dates and a higher risk of having babies who had low birthweight. Women with shifting work schedules had "a slight excess" of babies who had low birth weight.

The findings surprised the researchers who had expected that rotating shift work with nights would have the highest risk of pre-term birth because of the changing nature of the work schedule and possible disruption of hormonal rhythm.