

Interview with an Ergonomist

We interviewed Chris Fitzgerald, a Melbourne based Ergonomist with over 20 years of experience. He has assisted a broad range of industries to develop strategies to reduce injury risks. He provides some keen insights into what the early childhood sector needs to do to create safer workplaces for their staff.

1 Tell us about yourself and your work as an ergonomist

I have been working as an ergonomist since 1986. I have worked in both occupational rehabilitation and injury prevention roles and my rehabilitation work has been invaluable in teaching me about the true impact on people and organisations when injury prevention strategies are not effective. People can get injured at work and if they do it can have a massive impact on their work and personal life. Injury prevention work is very satisfying if you can create changes that reduce injury risks for a whole work population.

I have operated my own practice since 1993 and have contributed to national injury prevention programs in the administration, television, meat processing and telecommunication industries.

My focus in Victoria over the past 10 years has been on ergonomics and injury prevention for emergency services where I have helped to develop designs for vehicles and equipment used in ambulances and fire vehicles. This work has taken me to Germany and America where I am working with the US ambulance industry to introduce new designs in ambulances and equipment, similar to those we have developed in Australia. My passion is improving the design of work areas and equipment so they are safer and easier to use.

2 Could you explain the project you undertook for WorkSafe in the early childhood sector?

In 2010 I was engaged by WorkSafe Victoria to evaluate manual handling injury risks for this sector and develop specific strategies to reduce these injury risks. This project commenced soon after the introduction of the WorkSafe Children's Services – occupational health and safety compliance kit.

The project was conducted over 3 months and ELAA's OHS Champion Zora Marko was involved in every phase. The project involved visits to a small sample of four children's services providers and this included new and older services and buildings.

A consultative meeting to obtain industry feedback was conducted in June and a presentation of the findings and recommended strategies was made to industry participants during WorkSafe week in October.

I understand that WorkSafe Victoria is now using the information from this project to finalise its next wave of information for the sector.

3 What do you see as the most important OHS issues facing the sector?

The focus of the project was on the hazards that are affected by area layout, equipment and work methods. Many of the OHS issues that I consider important focus on those areas. These include:

- better ways of being able to work comfortably at floor level
- greater use of trolleys and the selection of trolleys that are suited to the equipment that they are likely to carry
- rationalisation of the storage of indoor and outdoor equipment and the use of storage systems that make it easier to access stored items

- improvements in the design of cots and change benches so they are easier to use and limit back and shoulder postures and movements for those working with them.

To introduce these changes the sector will need to work with manufacturers and suppliers of equipment to develop best practice solutions.

4 What needs to change to improve the sector's OHS performance?

I have found the establishment of precedents in better layout, design and work methods in an industry to be a very effective way of improving overall OHS performance across the sector.

This approach can help organisations to learn and benefit from the experience of others so they can fine tune these improvements to match their situation. It can provide direction for equipment suppliers to the sector so they can deliver the range of equipment that will support these changes.

Simply put, the industry needs to move forward to develop and implement solutions to these (manual handling) hazards. If this can be done so all services have access to this information and better designs that are developed then the potential to improve the sector's OHS performance should be enhanced.

