

Working and health conditions and preventive measures in a random sample of 5000 workers in the Veneto Region examined by telephone interview

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BACKGROUND: A survey was carried out in 2000 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in a random sample of workers from 15 countries of the European Union in order to obtain information on occupational exposure, health problems and preventive measures taken at the workplaces. **OBJECTIVES:** To obtain similar information in workers in the Veneto Region and compare the results with those of the third European Survey on Working Conditions (ESWC). The results of the survey on Veneto Region workers were further analyzed, investigating the distribution by risk factors in each work sector, and the association between risk factors and reported health problems. **METHODS:** The ESWC questionnaire was adapted to the requirements of a telephone interview and a sample of 5000 workers (size based on the budget) between 15 and 64 years of age was randomly extracted from the regional list of telephone subscribers. The questionnaire was administered by trained interviewers. No statistical tests were used in the comparison between ESWC and Veneto Region results due to the lack of a priori hypotheses. Odds ratio (OR) was calculated in estimating the association between risk factors and symptoms; and p-value for OR trend across the increasing level of exposure was also obtained. **RESULTS:** Workers reported to be exposed for more than a quarter of their work time to: vibrations (20%), noise (19%), dusts, fumes vapours, chemicals (18%), repetitive hand/arm movements (50%), tiring/painful positions (46%); working at very high speed or tight deadlines (60%). 54.4% of the subjects reported working with computers. Taking as a reference the third ESWC in 2000, among Veneto Region workers in 2005 exposure was lower as regards physical, chemical and ergonomic risk factors, and similar as regards working at very high speed. The more frequently reported work-related health problems were: stress (26.9%), backache (17.8%), overall fatigue (11.9%), muscular pains in upper limbs (6.8%), headache (6.1%), sight problems (5.4%), anxiety (5.5%), muscular pain in lower limbs (4.3%), irritability (4.0%), hearing problems (2.3%). Except for stress, all symptoms/health problems were two-three times more frequently reported in the ESWC than in the Veneto Region survey where, conversely, the number of persons with at least one new sick-leave spell was higher. Lastly, there was no difference as regards preventive measures taken at the workplace: information on risks (78.2%), wearing personal protective equipment (28.7%), training paid by employer (28.7%). Among the Veneto Region workers, the most often reported risk factors were exposure to physical and chemical risk factors in industry/agriculture, and shift-work and working at very high speed in the services. The most commonly adopted preventive measures were information on risks and wearing of personal protective equipment in industry, and training in services. Moreover, among the Veneto Region workers, a significant exposure-dependent increase was reported for respiratory problems, allergies, dermatitis, hearing loss, accidents, back pain, pain in the upper and lower limbs, and headache. The risk of stress, anxiety, sleeping problems, stomach pain and headache increased when skills were not adequate to cope with job demand. In contrast, the perception of improved health conditions increased with increasing skill discretion, decision authority, social support (which are dimensions of control of job demand), but not with information on risk, training, or use of personal protective equipment. **CONCLUSIONS:** Data from the present survey provide useful insights on working and health conditions of workers in the Veneto Region, revealing problems that were subsequently investigated using other sources of information, as reported in the studies published elsewhere in this volume.