



Volume 52

Issue 1 Volume 52: 1 & 2 combined issue

Article 7

2009

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Recommended Citation

Kaehr, Robert E. (2009) "What Do Meatpackers & Librarians Have in Common? Library Related Injuries and Possible Solutions," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol52/iss1/7>

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What Do Meatpackers & Librarians Have in Common?

Library Related Injuries and Possible Solutions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the benefit of exercise to alleviate or prevent injuries common to librarians and library staff. The library literature discusses some interventions such as ergonomics and corrective surgery regarding work-related injuries, but it barely mentions prevention especially as it relates to exercise. Insurance claims filed by library workers rack up thousands of dollars each year. In addition, lost time at work to correct work-related injuries adds much frustration and lost production. Alleviating or eliminating many such occurrences is possible by initiating and maintaining simple exercise programs. Numerous exercises are given that if used conscientiously will curtail the need for corrective medical intervention.

Popular opinion suggests that librarians are a sedentary bunch with little physical requirements beyond lifting a few books and occasionally moving a chair. The stereotype extends beyond that in the media to implying that librarians are “bi-focal wearing bunheads, collectors of cardigan sweaters, middle-aged women in polyester suits, Naturalizer shoes, and baggy stockings.... We’re smart, nerdy, no nonsense, and of course bookish” (Belben, 2004, p.38). Well, that is not true for many librarians, except for the *smart* and, hopefully, the *bookish* parts. Ask school librarian and writer Cathy Belben who rode her bike 20 miles to school, ran in local races and played basketball against the students (2004). Cathy Belben has been a real, live “Nancy Pearl,” action figure.

Brenda Crotts, a California technical services librarian, does not portray herself as a *wimpy* librarian. Brenda with over 40 marathons under her belt, an avid bodybuilder, and belly dancer certainly has stood outside the box of stereotypical librarians (Crotts, 1985).

Houston library’s active librarians and female staff exercised during lunchtime to the rhythms of Jane Fonda’s videos (“Jane,” 1983). If you prefer a slower pace, you might want to join the group of librarians in yoga classes at Pueblo, Colorado. Their director began the classes with a trained expert after having read about a public works department that began doing yoga to relieve stress. Pueblo found the stretches and movements of the training left their library team with less stress, stiffness and more energy (Lee, 2000).

Librarians, as a whole, will experience numerous injuries throughout their careers. Whether men or women, librarians are generally like other similar professions when it comes to physical fitness. Some stay fit and some do not. Much of the work of today’s librarian and staff is repetitive and involves

small muscles. Because of the nature of library work, it is common to see carpal-tunnel, neck strain and back injuries. According to Anne Turner, Director of Libraries at Santa Cruz City-County Library System, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics stated that librarians were more likely to have musculoskeletal disorders than other careers (Turner, 2004).

In our library over recent years, we have had a case of a serious torn tendon, which required continuing physical therapy over several months, a severe case of stiff neck, and a student worker who needed medical attention for a strained back from lifting.

There is little library literature that deals with musculoskeletal injuries. A few articles deal with ergonomics and injuries while articles on prevention through exercise are nearly non-existent. Exercise as a means of prevention for some of the most common library-related injuries is the focus of this article. Physical exercise will prevent or curtail the effects of most of these injuries.

From personal experience, I found almost complete relief from neck strain by doing some simple exercises given to me by my chiropractor, Dr. Steven Geders (Huntington, IN). First, I should mention that I have not been a big fan of chiropractic medicine. However, I must admit that I now thoroughly believe using the home exercises Geders gave me improved my life significantly. The stiff neck issue was resolved through exercise, but it took months before being resolved.

Neck Injuries

I developed a stiff neck nearly two years ago, attributed to poor ergonomics. I use two monitor screens in my office. One screen is to the side of the other. I often sat with poor posture, a bit slumped and twisting to the side,

to see one of the monitors. I frequently found myself propping my chin on my hand with my elbow on the desk. My neck had gotten so sore that at times it was hard to button my shirt. Although the pain subsided somewhat during the day, for months, I felt the discomfort. As you might gather, I am a rather stubborn person. Finally, my wife persuaded me to go to the chiropractor; I went. I did not want my spine manipulated, so I asked about neck exercises as a possible solution. Geders gave me a printout with several neck exercises to be done daily. After doing them for a week, I already began to feel much better. After about a month of exercising, I became pain-free, and I am still doing the exercises. I am working on posture and trying not to lean on my hand. I am not a therapist or a doctor. Therefore, I recommend that before trying any exercise programs to relieve pain you should consult with your doctor. My contention is that had I been doing these exercises before the problem, they would have prevented the neck strain in the first place.

His exercises are simple, and I do them at convenient times throughout the day such as when showering. I probably exercise no more than three or four times each day, but the recommendations are for five days per week. They consist of isometrics and doing them slowly for a count of six for each position. First, I turn my head to one side and try to touch my chin to my shoulder, holding that position. Then I do the other side, which is the practice for each of the exercises. Second, I place my chin on my chest and then move my head back as far as I can. Third, I place the right palm of my hand on the right side of my temple area and push against it. Next, I do it to the other side using the palm of my left hand. Fourth, I place my palm on the tip of my chin and apply pressure upwards.

Next, I place my hand behind my head and apply pressure toward the front of my head. Fifth, I place my palm on one side of my jaw/cheek bone and apply pressure and then to the other side. This is the basic regimen, but I have added one more exercise to close out the routine. I turn my head to each side as far

as I can. Of course, during this process if pain is significant, lighten the pressure. Of course, I now sit straighter and do not twist to look at my second screen. I am not a doctor or a physician, but these exercises left me pain-free.

Another neck problem is what Suzanne Delong, physical therapist with an MLS, called the ‘turkey vulture’ posture. This is when a librarian is craning the neck forward to hear a patron better or when looking at a computer terminal. Sometimes this posture can leave a person with this profile or a permanent thickened area at the back of the neck. Of course, people assume this position unconsciously. Delong recommended exercises to counteract difficulties that might develop. She suggested, “[Go] ahead and stick your neck out (you can and will do that whenever you want), but pull it back in frequently.” She continued with some humorous advice as a reminder: “...put up a picture of a turkey vulture on your terminal...” She suggested lastly moving your neck in every possible position “sort of like doing the hokey-pokey with your head” (1995, p. 695).

Neck strain is a serious problem, not just for the librarian profession. It may become a more pronounced problem in the future. According to the *TechKnowledge* section of [School Library Journal](#), a study showed that “50 percent of male and 56 percent of female computer users report neck pain” (Minkel, ed. 2001, p.33).

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Another of the more common injuries for librarians and other office-oriented occupations is carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). This wrist injury is not only painful, but it can be seriously de-habilitating. According to Joyce K. Thorton, CTS results from undue pressure on the median nerve, which passes through the carpal tunnel. She stated that it is the most common repetitive-motion injury, with about 23,000 cases reported every year (Sept 1995). Nonetheless, no one knows how many CTS injuries are library related because federal OSHA guidelines do not require

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reports concerning repetitive strain injuries among librarians (Gehner, 2004).

According to one study done at the Texas A&M University library, however, between September '91 and November '92, 14 library employees reported CTS injuries for which they were getting treatments. In addition, another 10 thought they had CTS but had not begun medical treatment. Their solution to the problem involved an expensive ergonomic one with various types of furnishings and equipment (Thornton, 1995). Imagining the Texas A&M study applied across the country, one can quickly realize the number of injuries and the staggering financial strain to solve the problem.

Library literature offered little information about prevention of CTS through exercising. One article, which alluded to exercises and which might be good for hands, fingers, and wrists, added the caveat that the author was not a doctor or physical therapist. Nonetheless, the common sense exercises offered seemed to have merit. For example, stretching the fingers out for a three count for five reps per day made sense. The author also recommended using a stress ball and making wrist circles (Mueller, 2006).

One article, however, suggested alleviating the need for CTS therapy or surgery altogether for many people. According to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons' *Academy News*, there are a number of exercises that "decrease the median nerve pressure responsible for CTS." The article continued by giving detailed drawings of the various exercises that begin the workday and continue after each break. The exercises included a five-minute warm-up. (Do each exercise for a count of five.):

- Standing, extend your arms and both wrists and fingers as if you were doing a push-up.
- Continue standing with your arms extended, straighten both wrists and allow the fingers to droop.

- While standing and with your arms extended, grip your hands into tight fists.
- Standing with your arms extended, bend the fists downward.
- As in step two, now allow your fingers to droop relaxed.
- Lastly, still while standing, put your arms down at your side while shaking them and relax (1996).

As implied by the title of this article, librarians share a common trait with meatpackers. Librarians and meatpackers both share a desire to conquer the de-habilitation of carpal tunnel. This article described an Oklahoma meat packing company, which had a high number of incidents of CTS. Through consistently using these exercises, the company decreased its workers' compensation loss ratio from 13.89% to 11.61%, and the CTS incidents decreased from 37% to 45.4% in one year. These exercises were subsequently implemented as a permanent part of their policy (Seradge, Bear, & Bithell, 2000).

Another significant study done by Rozmaryn, Dovel, Rothman, Gorman, Olvey, and Bartko came to a similar conclusion that exercise helped prevent CTS (Rozmaryn. et al., 1998). Nonetheless, more studies are needed to confirm the data according to Goodyear-Smith and Arroll's literature review of non-surgical management of carpal tunnel (2004).

Back Injuries

A third major type of library injury, strenuous lifting, or so it was suspected was examined. It is true that picking up books and moving furniture and equipment is common for librarians. However, is lifting heavy objects the real culprit in suffering lower back pain? Proper lifting techniques help prevent most of those injuries. Keeping the back straight, the item as close to the body as possible, bending the knees, and lifting using the legs prevents many self-inflicted back injuries. Of course, this technique may need practice, as old habits die fighting. However and surprisingly, most

back injuries are not caused by lifting at all. Sharon Liao, writing for *Prevention* stated that only “one in six back problems starts with heavy lifting.” In addition, she suggested that inactivity may be the more significant cause and that proper strength training and aerobic exercises most effectively treat back pain (2005). According to Julie D. Andrews, the best exercise for backs is a daily brisk walk or swim for 30 minutes each day (2006.) Interestingly, the same recommendations are generally the same for keeping a healthy heart, a two-for-one benefit.

Librarians need to take notice of a fitness life style for other reasons besides the prevention of injuries; it may be a matter of life or death. According to the Public Library of Columbus and Franklin County, the average person or woman from their staff was likely to die nine years before their optimal life expectancy. Lack of exercise was the reason most often given for the early deaths. In a survey given to their staff, thirty-seven percent of the women and 34 % of the men rated poor in performing regular exercise. On average, they exercised less than an hour per week (Health survey..., 1983).

Summary

Of course, other injuries plague the library profession, but neck, wrist, and back injuries seem to be three of the more common types. As suggested, there are things we can do beginning today to help prevent neck, wrist/hand, and back injuries. Doing simple exercises can save our institutions thousands of dollars each year as well as keep library employees working and pain-free.

More research concerning the prevention of work-related injuries needs to be undertaken. Although ergonomic solutions are important, they are often quite expensive. Guidance in physical exercise and posture offer less expensive and longer-term solutions. Although some institutions have incorporated mandatory exercise programs, wisdom dictates voluntary endeavors. Through either mandatory or voluntary programs, it is up to each of us to practice these exercises before troubles begin.

Again, if you already suffer with any of these problems, it is wise to consult with your doctor before embarking on any exercise program. Without consistently practicing the principles of prevention, we can either pay now or pay later. †

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