Don't be a tool during Tradies National Health Month

Sunday August 1 marked the beginning of Tradies National Health Month, and the Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is aiming to raise awareness about the health and injury risks involved in trade industries.

According to data from Safe Work Australia, the injury and illness incidence rate for trade workers is three times as high as any other occupation in the workforce. Tradies also have among the highest number of serious injury and illness claims in the country, with about 190 serious compensation claims made per day.

Tradies, along with their family, friends, employers and the wider community, are encouraged to take note of the increased chances of workplace-related incidents for workers in these industries. When a trade worker is injured on the job, it affects their family, business and community. Though they only make up a third of Australia's workforce, almost 60 per cent of serious workplace injuries involve a tradie.

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The APA is promoting Tradies National Health Month to highlight the daily risks tradies take when going to work. Former APA national president Phil Calvert is pushing for tradies to take their health more seriously and exercise all possible precautions on the work site.

"We need to get tradies to prioritise their health so that they can continue to play the important roles they hold in the workforce, their families and the community at large," Mr Calvert said.

"Australians' reliance on the work that tradies do is huge, so we need to encourage them to seek proper, evidence-based care before their small niggles become large issues that could potentially lead to time off work."

An industry study has shown that construction workers are about 143 per cent more likely than other industries to retire due to disability. Further to this, tradies in the industry were found to have a higher prevalence of musculoskeletal abnormalities, hearing problems, signs of obstructive lung disease, increased body mass index and other chronic health conditions.

Tradies face daily hazards at work, where risks include working with dangerous tools and equipment, electricity, harmful substances, extreme height and noise, and heavy objects or machinery.

Though workplace-related musculoskeletal disorders have decreased by seven per cent between 2000-01 and 2011-12, the APA states that claims arising from diseases have risen by four per cent in the same period.

The state government recently announced that from July 20, WorkSafe inspectors can issue on-the-spot fines to individuals or businesses who breach the state's Occupational Health and Safety Act. This is an immediate alternative to prosecuting individuals or businesses who breach the act.

Fines ranging from $363.48 to $1817.40 can be issued for infringements such as working without proper registration, licenses, qualifications, experience or supervision. Incorrect removal or storage of asbestos is also a fineable offence.

The Minister for Workplace Safety, Ingrid Stitt, is confident that these new penalties will increase workplace safety in Victoria.

"Adding on-the-spot fines to the range of compliance tools available to WorkSafe will provide a clear message to employers that putting their workers at risk will not be tolerated," Ms Stitt said.

"This is about making sure every worker gets home safely, and making sure that those who are doing the wrong thing face the consequences."

Trade workers' most important piece of equipment is their body. In physically demanding roles, caution should be exercised to minimise the risk of injury or sickness occurring.

Basic safety tips for tradies on site include:

- Warm up and stretch your muscles each day before you start work.
- Pace yourself throughout the day to ensure that you aren't overworked.
- Communicate with others on your job site to ensure that all workers are on the same page and can support each other.
- Use the correct technique or ask for help when lifting heavy objects to avoid injury.
- Speak up if you are uncomfortable about something you have been asked to do: you're allowed to say no to a task if you think it might be harmful to your health.
- Alert the relevant supervisor or manager on site and seek medical advice if you are injured or experience a workplace-related injury.

Workers in the industry need to consider the roles of food and nutrition, exercise, mental health care and exercising safety in the workplace to ensure a holistically healthy approach to work.

Tradies National Health Month runs from Sunday, August 1 to Tuesday, August 31. For more information, visit www.choose.physio/fortradies

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