

Acoustic shock

David Lilly, Project Director, Keith Broughton, Health & Safety Chairman, and Dr Andrew N Graham-Cumming, Medical Chairman, Acoustic Safety Programme, highlight a contributing factor to a £2.5bn annual loss...

There has been a serious and damaging problem in the call centre sector for many years, according to research by the Health & Safety Executive carried out by the Health & Safety Laboratory, which is supported by case studies from the Communication Workers Union. To date, there has been very little public acknowledgement of the widespread existence of acoustic shock and noise interference at work.

The indicated damage to the UK's telephony operatives (approximately 3% of the working population), with the millions of pounds in compensation employers have paid out to date, and the contribution that acoustic shock makes to the estimated annual £2.5bn cost of absenteeism and staff attrition in the call centre sector, is a frightening prospect.

The DTI has been positive and proactive by bringing the problem of acoustic shock to the fore in its support for this valuable employment sector, as follows: "The UK Government, through the Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry, has recognised the importance of the CCMA's Acoustic Safety Programme to call centres in this rapidly expanding sector of UK economy. DTI recognises the move to encourage the call centre industry to put in place measures to control acoustic shock, but acknowledges the ongoing considerations of the HSE of the impact on call centre staff" (Stephen Rhodes, Business Relations, DTI).

To grasp the true nature of acoustic shock and its symptoms, as well as the effects on the workforce and bottom line profit of an organisation, one should consider the following statements of fact:

In an RNID study of 15 call centres, telephony operatives were tested for the symptoms of acoustic shock. 30% were showed to suffer from tinnitus (ringing in the ear) and 39% 'believed their hearing had been damaged during their employment in the call centre'.

Acoustic shock, or noise interference, follows exposure to unexpected, short duration noise, which seems loud compared with background noise levels. It may occur at peak levels as low as 50dB. The more obvious symptoms include:

- Tinnitus
- Ear pain
- Dizziness and nausea
- Impaired hearing
- Over sensitivity to loud noises
- Anxiety

Those affected may go on to develop a wider range of symptoms, including:

- Headaches
- Depression
- Fear of work
- Lack of energy
- Inability to maintain a normal social existence

The initial symptoms may cause short-term absence from work. The longer-term symptoms that develop in some sufferers may become a cause of long-term absence, but equally importantly, can affect their personal performance and, consequently, company profits.

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The CWU estimate that there have been more than 500 claims in the UK for damages associated with the symptoms of acoustic shock, resulting from breaches in common law by the employer, for example, the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998, Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995, and the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 all enforce a duty of care upon the employer over their employee. These claims have resulted in out of court settlements in excess of £3m and there are reported to be an average of 10-15 new cases every month. The CWU has confirmed that their legal department have 123 current acoustic shock cases pending.

The companies who have paid compensation range from well-known household names to smaller localised businesses – acoustic shock does not play any favourites and, because acoustic shock is not specifically legislated for, does not mean that organisations do not have to take action. Action must be taken before they break the duty of care and have cases for damages set against them.

Ask yourself: how many staff does your call centre have off work at any one time, short- or long-term, with symptoms matching those described above? There is always someone off sick, or handing in their notice where reasons stated will include some of the above.

How can this be?

Since the beginning of the CCMA's Acoustic Safety initiative, when the team began to consult with industry and some of the world's leading specialists, it quickly became obvious that the biggest problem was a lack of knowledge and awareness. This state, combined with some cases of corporate denial, has meant that the UK's call centre workforce continues to be subjected to serious work and life changing risks, as well as subjecting industry to a crippling cost.

Acoustic trauma is a matter of physical damage to the hearing mechanism caused by exposure to loud noise. It is not a volume related problem.

Current and future noise regulations do not have sufficient bearing on acoustic shock. The new EEC 2003/10/EC Directive being implemented into the Control of Noise at Work Regulations 2005 (April/06) only sets a single peak level of 135dB(C) and a daily exposure of 80dB(A) over an eight hour working day period, which, if exceeded, requires actions to be taken. A 30 millisecond acoustic shock of 90dB(C) would not necessarily push the daily average above 80dB(A), for example. The DTI guidance maximum exposure level of 118dB protects a telephony operative from acoustic trauma, but not from acoustic shocks or noise interference below that level. However, these new EU Directives do require an employer to provide an audiogram for every employee working in a noise environment.

Technical solutions prior to 2005 did not sufficiently prevent acoustic shock incidences from occurring below 118dB; however, there have been many new technological developments this year, which have resulted in new and improved solutions that tackle the prevention issue head on.

The psychological and physiological symptoms of acoustic shock have not been researched fully anywhere in the world, and employers have not been able to access any practical guidance or fact on the medical issues surrounding the risk until now, through the Acoustic Safety Programme, which has brought private medical research and papers from leading doctors on the subject together to form one central body of

work that will help employers and healthcare providers to properly diagnose and treat workers exposed to this risk.

Telephone operatives have little to no knowledge of how to recognise acoustic shock and its symptoms, so with contributions from the world's leading experts, the initiative has been able to create a course specifically designed to provide employers and employees with an appropriate level of understanding and guidance.

The Health & Safety Executive states that 'operators should be trained to recognise such incidents and how to report them' and 'organisations that operate call centres are further advised that they should keep up-to-date with developments in this field...'

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Misinformation that exists in the marketplace continues to put operatives in the UK at risk. One company in a bid to protect its market share recently issued an article in an industry magazine that stated '...acoustic shock (only) occurs above 118dB...'. When the HSE, RNID, CWU, DTI and IOA have all published evidence to the contrary, this kind of attitude puts our telephony operatives at serious risk. All industry representative organisations and telephony equipment manufacturers need to work together to ensure clarity, accuracy, and the enhancement of health and safety in the workplace. For our part, the 'CCMA Acoustic Safety Programme' wishes to present the facts in an impartial manner, supported by world leading experts along with government, union and industry leaders, as follows:

Acoustic Shock is fast becoming a major problem in the call centre industry. This has been recognised in the Health and Safety Executive's latest statement on their website. They are attaching much to the fact that the industry must keep in touch with recent developments through learning. The Acoustic Safety Programme fulfils this requirement by bringing managers the current facts of the problem and the latest solutions available. The team of experts have been brought together offering information never before released in the UK, giving all managers in the industry the opportunity to take part in this learning so importantly recognised by the HSE.

Whilst volume is clearly a contributory factor, it is only one of a number of factors that make up the issue as a whole. It is the lack of knowledge and awareness of all these factors, and their interaction with each other that the Acoustic Safety Programme will address. Most call centre workers find

acoustic incidents disagreeable. Some are able to shrug the event off. Others have unpleasant symptoms of disturbed hearing for days or weeks, resulting in time off work. A very unfortunate few have long-term symptoms continuing years after the event. They do not have hearing loss but they have increased sensitivity to noise. They cannot cope with a noisy environment and may be incapable of returning to call centre work. For those most affected, the result is complete disruption of working and social life. Because of their hearing difficulty, they can no longer socialise in pubs and clubs or at parties. They can become socially isolated, and may become depressed and anxious. The Acoustic Safety Programme is the first proactive approach to this problem in the UK. I see it as the way to bring this occupational health issue into the open – so that affected workers get the care and attention they need before they develop long-term ill health.

"The CWU fully supports the Acoustic Safety Programme and its objectives in providing a good method of sharing experiences and creating awareness to reduce this hazard in the call centre workplace" (Dave Joyce, National Health & Safety Officer, Communication Workers Union).

"The TUC is committed to the health, safety and protection of the estimated one million call centre operatives in the UK providing an important service to the UK economy. The Acoustic Safety Programme goes some way towards providing a solution to the continuing proven risks associated with acoustic shock and its cost to industry, and the TUC fully supports these aims and their application in the workplace" (Hugh Robertson, Policy Officer TUC, Commissioner HSC, Industrial Injuries Advisory Board).

What to do next?

Our invitation goes out to all employers to protect their businesses, employees and this vital growing sector by eliminating the problem and treating existing cases effectively. The Acoustic Safety Programme is an online forum and resource centre (www.acousticshock.org) for both employers and employees affected by noise at work. The Programme also offers national conferences and regional seminars, and through both these mediums, we believe that companies can benefit; however, each company should also develop their own initiative to safeguard their employees from acoustic shock and noise interference through technological advancement, diagnosis and treatment using experts, and give all their staff a practical and effective knowledge on the subject, all of which will, in turn, reduce the loss of profit associated with sickness, absenteeism and staff attrition.

Immediately following the European Safety and Health at work week, which this year focuses on noise at work, will be the Acoustic Safety Conference and workshop event (7th and 11th November 2005). This event delivers industry lead-

ing keynotes, knowledge, training, legislative guidance, policy compliance, case studies, new 2006 compliant preventative technology and equipment, specialist occupational health studies and presentations from leading solutions providers. There will also be exciting announcements by the National Physical Laboratory on a new acoustic shock research project with the Acoustic Safety Programme, as well as a new sponsored 'National Noise Safety Excellence Award' for call centre employers.

Post-event services will include nationwide access to audiometric screening, equipment testing, remedial and occupational health support, e-learning, and ongoing updates and support.

This year, there has been a marked improvement in general awareness of the problem and acceptance of the risk, which, as a result, has seen hundreds of the UK's largest employers, including government departments with thousands of call centre workers and major private sector customer service centres with equal numbers of agents, benefiting from the knowledge and opportunities that this Programme has to offer.

With significant support from the National Physical Laboratory and the Programme's industry sponsors, we are able to offer free delegate places at the conferences, where a company's health and safety, call centre or human resources manager will be able to join some of the world's leading technical, engineering and medical experts in the field of noise and acoustics. Any company can attend this learning and solutions experience on 7th and 11th November 2005 at the National Physical Laboratory Conference Centre, Teddington, London, and should book online to reserve their place.

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