

LETTER TO EDITOR

Hand Safety- Better to Prevent than Repent

Sir,

"The hand is the visible part of the brain"

For all intents and purposes, hands are used by everyone for every task, whether at work or at home. Because of this fact, hands are the most commonly injured body parts. Hand injuries comprise a substantial proportion of trauma seen in every hospital worldwide. Although hands can be injured anywhere on the road, in the workplace, and at home in this age of industrialization with incredible dependence on tools and machines, occupational and industrial hand injuries are on the global rise, both in developed and developing countries. Studies have demonstrated that 70% of major hand trauma due to machines is preventable. Hand injuries occur mainly among young adults, predominantly males. Many of these injuries inflict the dominant hand, thereby impeding a person's ability to work or cope with social obligations.

More commonly, these injuries result from human error attributed to distraction and carelessness, deactivation of safety features, or bypassing safety norms. Distraction in the form of a wandering mind, looking away from a machine, discussing with a person, talking on the phone, or general frustration (especially among young males with rage or anger) can lead to injury. The bending of the rules or ignoring instructions can cause serious injuries. So, taking cognizance of these occupational hand injuries calls for multidisciplinary inputs from engineering departments, public health specialists, epidemiologists, hand surgeons, psychologists, social scientists, and others.

Hands get traumatised in a flash, but their consequences can be long-lasting. A serious injury to the hand can have a substantial negative impact on working ability and overall

quality of life. These injuries lead to major social and financial losses, in addition to permanent deformities and/or dysfunction. The financial losses incurred are in terms of medical expenses for treatment, time away from work, and loss of job. The person may be rendered partially or completely dependent as well.

With the continual expansion of industries and more and more motorised tools and machines coming into the market, hand injuries are exhibiting a soaring curve. Hence, increasing awareness and improving management strategies for such injuries are earnestly warranted.

All this is reason enough to make hand safety a priority in any workplace. As the old adage says "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure", hand safety is all about preventing hand injuries by taking precautions, and the best way to do so is by using the right equipment and following the proper safety procedures. There are a few basic rules of hand safety that everyone should know and, more importantly, follow. It is well said that you should never put your hand in an area where you cannot see it. The use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for the task at hand should seldom be forgotten. This may include gloves, hand shields, etc. Gloves are the most common form of PPE found in workplaces. Gloves must always be worn when working with hazardous materials; they will protect the hands from harsh chemicals and sharp objects. Awareness of work surroundings is another important mantra, in the sense that one should be sure that the work area is clear of any potential hazards, like dangerous,

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powered, or motorised tools or electric wires or harmful chemicals that could cause an accident. When working with potentially hazardous materials, make sure to observe proper safety procedures. When working with machinery, the proper safety equipment, such as gloves or guards, should be adhered to. All safety procedures, such as keeping hands away from moving parts and being extra careful when using power tools, ought to be followed. While working with electrical wiring, non-conductive gloves will protect your hands from electricity. Last but not least, in case of any injury, medical attention needs to be sought immediately.

In addition, occupational safety programme implementation holds the promise of preventing such mishaps. We can try and advocate for integrating hand injury prevention into the public health agenda and ongoing public health programmes. The safety programme might comprise engineering and administrative controls and PPE. Engineering controls rely on using machines and tools with built-in safety systems. Examples are safety guards, electrical proximity-limiting devices, emergency stop devices, and ergonomic tools. If these controls cannot be enacted or fail to contain the risk, the management can call administrative controls into play. These include, among others, safety training, physical safety guards, warning

signs, product substitutions, and adherence to ergonomic principles. When both of these are either insufficient or impractical, it becomes mandatory for the company management to provide PPE to safeguard the workers engaged in at-risk jobs.

As hand surgeons and health care personnel, we have the responsibility to harness the epidemiological data on hand injuries in our region and have a comprehensive account of hand trauma to support further research. The peripheral medical system should be upgraded to provide the best initial treatment and first aid to the victims of such injuries. Public awareness camps and campaigns on occupational hand injury prevention can be undertaken. Knowledge about the common causes of occupational hand injuries, means of preventing them, first aid after injury, and early care of the mangled or amputated part can be imparted. A determined, dedicated venture with regard to preventing hand injuries will surely yield positive sequels in the near future.

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