Drywall tradespeople in Ontario have it rough. Statistics from the Workplace Safety Insurance Board—that’s the name given to the workers’ compensation board in the province—indicate that the trade has the highest rate of lost time injuries in the construction industry.

Typically, overexertion injuries, particularly to the back and shoulders as a result of taping and sanding, are high on the list, representing 40 percent of all the types of injuries in the drywall and plastering trades.

Stats go on to state that on average plaster or drywall-application-related injury costs represent $4,500 in lost time. That’s more than double the average lost time cost per injury in all of the other building trades, which comes in at a paltry $2,200. Many drywall/plaster injuries are due to falls off scaffolding, benches or ladders. But many others are back, neck, shoulder and arm-related injuries due simply to overexertion.

In an effort to stem the injury tide, the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario in conjunction with the International Union of Painters & Allied Trades and the Construction Safety Association of Ontario, has embarked on a year-long ergonomic study. Called Ergonomic and Hygiene Interventions to Improve the Health and Safety of Drywall Finishing Workers, the $59,500 (Canadian funds) study will observe a spate of drywall contractors using tools designed to eliminate many of these overexertion-related injuries.

The goal of the study is twofold: to determine the potential reduction of musculoskeletal injuries when finishers use a drywall pneumatic finishing machine, and to assess the potential reduction in dust exposure and other hazards when finishers use a power vacuum sanding system with a contained dust control.

For the test, the drywall/plasterer finishers will use a drywall finishing machine made by Apla-Tech and a Porter-Cable drywall vacuum sander. Both tools are designed with extended reach to minimize stretching and worker overexertion.

Peter Vi, ergonomist at CSAO, says to date few tradespeople use such tools in the industry “We’re hoping to show that the health and safety of these workers is increased by using these type of tools,” he explains.

Vi says the idea behind using a power dust control sander is to prevent workers from breathing in silica particulate (contained in drywall compound). A study conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Health concluded that the exposure of workers to silica dust during drywall sanding operations is well above the recommended maximum exposures to the microscopic particulate. Silica is known to cause serious respiratory ailments. In a nutshell, it found that most tapers were breathing too much silica.

The study will observe 15 drywall finishers. An instructor will be hired to train them in the proper usage of the two tools. Among the contractors that have agreed to be part of the study are Four Seasons Drywall Systems & Acoustics, Four Star Drywall, Torino Drywall and P.J. Daly Contracting Ltd. The contractors are expected to begin using the tools early next year.

Vi says it is the first time such an ergonomic study has been done in the building industry in Ontario. Hugh Laird, executive director of ISCA, views the study as a positive note in the industry: “If we can come up with a tool that the industry will use, it could save hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost time injuries and eliminate much of the pain and suffering of workers.”

To be completed next October, the study is being funded by the WSIB. Watch for future columns on how things are going.

About the Author
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