Ergonomics and Manual Handling Fatality File

Back attack! The real cost of manual handling injuries

A 54-year-old library assistant was instructed by her employer to help move 80,000 books from one area of the library to another over a four-month period. She was told to lift stacks of books and pack them into boxes – weighing up to 22kg each. These were then loaded onto trolleys and taken to their new destination.

The librarian had not been trained in manual handling techniques and consequently developed back pain from the persistent heavy lifting. She told her manager about the pain and took three days off to rest, however, on returning to work she was told to carry on with moving the boxes.

Her back pain became so severe that her back seized up altogether. Despite seeking treatment from a specialist pain clinic to help her to manage the discomfort, she continues to suffer from chronic back pain which prevents her from working. Her local authority employer did not offer her alternative light duties and she was subsequently dismissed on grounds of medical incapability.

She said: “I never had any problems with my back before lifting those boxes but now I have to adapt my life around managing the pain.

“The fact that my employers denied they were to blame for my injuries and the end of my career was particularly galling. I planned to carry on working until retirement to help pay for my daughter’s university tuition fees but that’s no longer an option for me.”