

**COUNCIL OF IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY POLICY 2017/2018**



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Introduction

This policy is aimed to outline and incorporate the most recent industry health and safety standards for sign language interpreters, including relevant research drawn from European and international best practices.

This guide is intended for working interpreters, interpreting students and educators, and those who employ or procure the services of interpreters. Please note: **this is a working document, subject to change. It is not to be taken as a prescriptive document, to be enforced in all interpreting situations.** Each interpreting assignment is unique, and interpreters should use this as a guide to analysing each assignment and deciding on the appropriate configuration and arrangements for interpretation. **It is the interpreter whose expertise and knowledge should guide final decisions as to the above.**

Occupational health education is essential for professionals to avoid early attrition from the practice due to overuse injuries and inadequate breaks. Injury can occur among sign language interpreters due to forceful, speedy, repetitive movements of signing whilst working under the pressure of the intense mental processing involved in interpreting, often combined with insufficient rest breaks and awkward positioning. The continuous occurrence of these factors can place an interpreter at risk of injury. Repetitive Strain Injury is defined as

“excessive repetitive movements without adequate rest breaks which cause micro traumas to the tissues. With a rest break, the body can heal itself. Without the break, the body then begins its inflammatory response in order to heal the injury. During the inflammatory response, the body sends signals to let us know that the healing process has

begun: redness, pain, swelling, warmth and loss of range to the range of motion. If during the healing process, the muscles are used repeatedly, the injured area begins to swell more and more edema can develop."

Musculoskeletal Disorders Among Sign Language Interpreters

The major area of concern for interpreters in workplace health and safety terms is overuse injury. Over the past 20 years, the range of overuse injuries has been collectively referred to as Repetitive Strain Injury. Increasing evidence suggests that one in four sign language interpreters may experience symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders severe enough to modify their activities.

The National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (1986) defines overuse injury as:

- A collective term for a range of conditions characterised by discomfort or persistent pain in muscles, tendons and other soft tissues, with or without physical manifestations.
- Occupational Overuse Syndrome is usually caused or aggravated by work and is associated with repetitive movement, sustained or constrained postures and/or forceful movements.

Factors that may contribute to the development of overuse injuries:

- Biomechanical factors such as constrained posture; the frequency of repetitive movement; the force used in performing movements; faults

in equipment and task design, and increased muscle tension associated with mental stress.

- Faulty work organisation such as: the duration of work without rest; bonus and overtime incentives; lack of training and supervision; and ineffective supervision.

It has been well established that sign language interpreters experience high levels of upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders. During the 1988-1989 academic year at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), 45% of the employed sign language interpreters were either completely disabled or had to reduce their workload due to upper extremity pain (DeCaro, Feuerstein, & Hurwitz, 1992). In the following year, 60% of the full-time interpreters at NTID were diagnosed with either work-related tendonitis or nerve entrapment disorders (Feuerstein & Fitzgerald, 1992). During that same time period, a survey of the Southern California Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf found that approximately 44% of members had some type of overuse syndrome (Sanderson, 1987). Scheuerle, Guilford, & Habal (2000) surveyed 145 interpreters and found that 119 (82%) had experienced some form of disabling pain that they attributed to sign language interpreting. Most recently, Fischer & Woodcock (2012) surveyed 314 interpreters and found that 38% reported that they had been diagnosed with some form of MSD. So, despite the awareness of the issue being raised nearly 25 years ago, the prevalence of MSDs among sign language interpreters remains a serious problem within the profession (Donner et al 2016).

A survey of AVLIC members was completed in 2006, with 314 working interpreters responding. The point prevalence of pain in each site (reported pain at the moment of completing the survey) is shown on Figure 5. Pain was reported most often on the neck and right shoulder, but multiple pain locations were reported. Interpreters rated pain severity during interpreting work (one hour solo or all-day teamed) as significantly more painful than the level felt during completion of the survey.

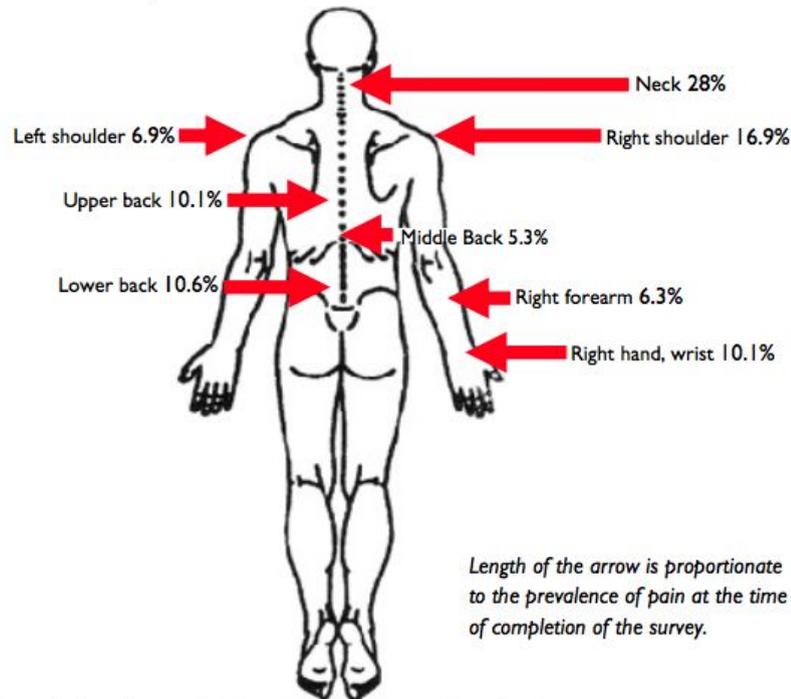


Figure 5. Prevalence of pain at eight sites among Canadian interpreters

Interpreting Duration & Adequate Breaks

- ASLIA recommends that an interpreter should work no more than 5 hours per day and a total of 25 hours per week. However, many interpreters are working beyond this recommended limit. A result of this tendency to work beyond recommended limits is a sharp increase in the number of interpreters who are unable to work for a period (or permanently) due to Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS) or Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). *note ref number 15.
- Interpreting is a highly skilled process, which requires intense concentration. Therefore the interpreter requires appropriate breaks.

Ideally when working in teams, the interpreter will interpret for 20 minutes and then the “off-task” interpreter will interpret.

- However, when working alone, there is additional pressure on the interpreter to perform at his/her maximum. In order to ensure best working practice, breaks must be given to the interpreter. Usually after 35 - 45 minutes, a 10-15 minute break is required.
- Some sources suggest that even these break times are not sufficient. The International Organisation for Standardisation recommends, that for longer assignments the interpreter should be provided with a break after a maximum of 60 minutes of consecutive interpreting and 15 to 30 minutes of simultaneously interpreting.
- If an interpreting assignment is longer than one hour in duration, it is essential for two interpreters to be employed. The interpreters will work in turn, for periods of between fifteen and thirty minutes at a time.
- For interpreting assignments greater than two days in duration it is suggested that a team of three or more interpreters be considered.

When To Use Two Interpreters

- In an international setting, or when there are more than two languages or foreign (sign) languages used in the setting.
- Adequate breaks are essential for anything between 45 mins to 1.5 hrs, beyond which 2 interpreters must be used. The interpreter(s) in question must be deferred to if these guidelines are proposed to be wavered.
- At conferences or large events.
- Where the Deaf person has a main responsibility during the event, e.g. president, presenter, leader.
- Where the content is highly technical or of an academic nature.
- Where Deaf participants with different communication needs, or deafblind participants, are attending.
- In a range of specific settings; for example where some of the Deaf participants are participating in a panel discussion, and others are in the audience. In this setting, a minimum of four interpreters are needed: two teams of two interpreters each.

- If no preparation material is provided, it can become difficult for the interpreter to understand information due to the gap in knowledge between participants and the interpreter. This can lead to a breakdown in communication, if the interpreter cannot interpret what is not understood / known, due to lack of preparation on the part of the booking party. It is essential that booking parties and all participants be guided by the interpreter in relation to what preparation is needed. There will be cases where, without the relevant preparation, an assignment will not be able to be interpreted.

- Lack of preparation results in additional physical and cognitive stress for the interpreter. The quality of the interpretation also decreases.

- Wherever possible, preparation should be provided to the interpreter well in advance of the assignment date. This will include items such as:
 - lecture/presentation notes

 - agenda / programme / order of ceremonies

 - minutes of the previous meeting

 - PowerPoint presentations

 - any such material relating to the event that would aid the interpreter in preparing.

Educational interpreting

- The pace at which information is delivered in an educational setting is usually quite fast. In addition, information to be interpreted may come from a variety of sources – live presentations, film, videos or audio recordings. Owing to the physical and cognitive fatigue that is created for an educational interpreter by the demands of an educative environment with its variable, high speed delivery, special consideration must be given to their work circumstances.
- Careful consideration must be given to whether an educational interpreter can effectively and safely work alone, or if it is necessary to employ a second interpreter to allow working as a team.
- Any audio or video presentation must be clear and of sufficient volume to allow it to be easily heard by the interpreter. Where possible, it is recommended that captioned video and DVD presentations be used. The presentation should be provided to the interpreter prior to the interpretation to allow him or her to become familiar with the content.
- Factors to be considered include, but are not limited to:
 - the density and pace of content,
 - the overall demands of classroom interaction and participation,
 - the overall schedule of interpreting that the interpreter may provide on a given day across multiple classes, lessons or lectures,
 - the amount of time spent in the classroom when students are working individually and independently of instruction.
- We recommend interpreters work with employers to ensure the above points are fully considered in an assignment.

Interpreter Responsibility and Self Awareness

Interpreters also need to take responsibility for their own health and safety in the workplace. The following points should be put into use as part of any interpreter's professional practice:

- Interpreters should be involved in all decisions affecting their work.
- Interpreters need to see their health and safety given high priority, and should feel able to report concerns promptly and confidently, without fear of retribution or punitive measures.
- Interpreters should educate themselves to the risk factors involved in the profession, and undertake measures to lessen the risk to themselves.
- Interpreters should consider their signing style and whether it can be modified to lessen stress on joints.
- Interpreters should make a habit of stretching before and after an assignment. Use exercise and stretching activities to contribute to optimal levels of interpreter well-being and performance.
- Interpreters must use their discretion to ensure team interpreter(s) are booked where required, for assignments over one hour in duration.
- Interpreters should make sure adequate breaks are taken during the day. Ensure you have a proper morning, lunch and afternoon break.

- If returning to work after a lengthy break, ease back into full time work slowly.
- If problems occur, bring them to the attention of management immediately. Do not carry on working in an unsafe environment. Report any potential hazards as soon as possible.

Video Relay Interpreting

- Contracted hours of work should consider the duration and intensity of work and ensure suitable breaks are provided.
- Video interpreters are at risk of developing conditions such as repetitive movement injuries, eyestrain, physical and emotional fatigue.
- Under standard working conditions an interpreter's performance is known to degrade after a period of 30 minutes (ASLI 2015 & CISLI 2017).
- Interpreter's working in call centre environments have provided subjective reports of mental fatigue after approximately 20 minutes of work leading to perceived increase of errors in production, thus compromising the quality of service they provide (Braun & Taylor, 2011; Moser-Mercer, 2003 & 2005 cited in ASLI 2015).
- Short, frequent breaks are more satisfactory than occasional, longer breaks: e.g. a 5 -10 minute break after 50 - 60 minutes continuous

screen and/or keyboard work is likely to be better than a 15 minute break every two hours.

- If possible, breaks should be taken away from the screen. Evidence from studies show that informal breaks, away from the screen (e.g. on other tasks), appear to be more effective in relieving visual fatigue than formal rest breaks.
- Together with interpreting breaks, Health Service Executive recommendations state that people working at a computer screen should take regular eye breaks (See resources for more detail).
- The interpreter's amount of work at the screen should be monitored and should they experience periods of work at a particularly high pace or intensity, this should also be taken into account.

Resources

1. <https://aslia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ASLIA-OHS-Policy.pdf>
2. <http://www.odi.govt.nz/new-zealand-sign-language-nzsl/nzsl-tools-and-resources/publications/part-5-resources-and-further-information/slianz-occupational-safety-and-health-standard-practice-paper/>
3. <https://intrpr.github.io/library/rid-spp-cumulative-motion-injury.pdf>
4. <http://signlanguageinterpreting.ie/booking-terms-conditions/>
5. <http://efsli.org/sli-profession/>
6. <http://rid.org/UserFiles/File/pdfs/117.pdf>
7. <http://www.odi.govt.nz/resources/guides-and-toolkits/working-with-nzsl-interpreters/5-resources-slianz-osh-paper.html>

8. <https://interpreter-ne.ie/hs-2/>
9. <https://wfdeaf.org>
10. http://www.skhs.queensu.ca/ergbio/publications/peer_review/Fischer_Work_2012.pdf
11. http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/joi/vol25/iss1/4/?utm_source=digitalcommons.unf.edu%2Fjoi%2Fvol25%2Fiss1%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages
12. <http://www.avlic.ca/docs/OHSGuideforSLI.pdf>
13. <https://www.iso.org/standard/54082.html>
14. <http://www.ryerson.ca/woodcock/ohsforsli/>
15. <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/disability-support/submissions/subdr0881.rtf>
16. ASLI 2015: *Video Interpreting Best Practice*. Available at: https://www.asli.org.uk/app/uploads/2017/05/ASLI_Video_Interpreting_Best_Practice_VIBP-1.pdf
17. Health Service Executive: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/contact/faqs/vdubreaks.htm>