

Researchers call for updates to physical employment standards to better ensure the health and safety of workers

June 9 2016

A review of current physical employment standards, that act as a call to action for more research and standardization in industry, is now available. New tenets proposed for physical employment standards include improving age- and sex-neutrality and point to areas that require more research such as the implications of the nutritional health and hydration of the worker, protective clothing, and load carriage. Published today in [*Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*](#) (*APNM*), a special issue on best practices in physical employment standards provides an international perspective on these issues and is the first time that the topics of importance to physical employment standards are consolidated into one place.

The field of employment standards for physically demanding jobs is a complex intersection between many disciplines including human rights, law, medicine, occupational health and safety, and physiology. Improved practice in developing and implementing employment standards requires a multidisciplinary approach to solving some of its most complex issues. Workers such as firefighters, military personnel, police officers, and paramedics cannot avoid the stress associated with their work and rely on standards to help both define and understand the risks and challenges associated with their jobs. Ensuring standards adequately represent the real-world situations that these workers face each day is critical, not only to our first responders, but to the public who rely on them.

"I was stunned at the lack of resources available to advance knowledge and support best practices in the field of physical employment standards, especially considering the consequences that poor practices have on employee health and public safety," says APNM Editor and contributor to the special issue, Dr. Terry Graham. "A large part of this gap is due to the fact that the organizations that have historically developed physical employment standards are not publishing research in peer-reviewed journals which means the standards are not subject to the rigor that the academic publishing process provides," continues Dr. Graham.

"Standardizing testing regimes across departments, provinces, and nationally is an essential step in ensuring we are minimizing risk, first and foremost to the individual worker, the team, the department and the community as a whole," says Vern Elliott, Deputy Fire Chief, Strathcona County, Alberta. "Opening up the dialogue between occupations that rely on physical employment standards strengthens the foundation of appropriate standardization; we all have a role to play in considering how sex, age and other factors affect standards and we have a responsibility to take a leadership role in linking the scientific research and real-world application," continues Mr. Elliott.

The research published today also brings light to the fact that the standards for establishing eligibility for employment and return to work are not standardized nationally or internationally; in fact, historically, employment standards have been established locally or regionally based on young, male workers under near perfect testing conditions.

"Unfortunately, these controlled testing models do not always adequately represent the unpredictable work conditions faced by these individuals and this discrepancy is rarely addressed in standards," says Dr. Stewart Petersen, one of the guest editors of the special issue and professor with the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. "Few areas of science carry the responsibility of allowing or denying an individual the opportunity to work. This responsibility

underscores the priority that must be assigned to the support and funding of employment standards research that will fill knowledge gaps and ensure that workers in physically demanding occupations are safe, healthy, fulfilled and productive," continues Dr. Petersen.

One of the main goals of consolidating, reviewing and providing new recommendations for physical employment standards is to address ways through which this important field of study may move toward more uniform and defensible practices as well identify areas for future research. The correct implementation of physical employment standards should allow employers to identify, without inappropriate discrimination, individuals who are well suited to the demands of the workplace and reduce the risk of workplace injuries.

This special issue is available as open access to ensure the widest possible distribution of these papers, which cross academic and geographical boundaries and whose implications affect organizations and individuals outside of the traditional academic sphere.

Provided by Canadian Science Publishing (NRC Research Press)

Citation: Researchers call for updates to physical employment standards to better ensure the health and safety of workers (2016, June 9) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-physical-employment-standards-health-safety.html>

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