

Construction and transport workers face high risk of traumatic spinal injuries

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Workers in the construction and transport industries experience high rates of traumatic spinal injuries, and there is an urgent need for more effective safety and prevention measures, says a new study led by a team

at UNSW Sydney and the University of Sydney.

Published today in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, the study investigated 824 cases of people admitted to NSW hospitals over three years with workplace-related traumatic spinal injuries.

The data show that 86 per cent of injured workers were male, had an average age of 47 years and spent 16 days on average in hospital. In all, these injuries accounted for 13,302 acute-care bed days with a cost of \$19.5 million for time off work and medical costs.

Co-author Professor Rebecca Ivers, Head, School of Public Health & Community Medicine at UNSW Sydney said that there is a clear need for stronger regulation and education in the construction and transport sectors.

"Prevention is by far the best approach and we know that effective regulation is the most cost-effective means of reducing injury," she explained.

The study's lead author, Dr. Lisa Sharwood of the University of Sydney School of Medicine, added: "Our study reveals that 50 per cent of work-related spinal injuries happened in the construction industry and 31 per cent occurred in transport vehicle crashes.

"In the construction industry, 78 per cent of spinal injuries were due to falls. These were predominantly falls from height, such as from building structures, scaffolding or ladders.

"This study demonstrates that the [construction industry](#) is still experiencing a high burden of work-related spinal trauma, particularly related to falls, despite safety measures being in place.

"Increased local surveillance of safety systems and stricter enforcement of relevant legislation is needed to reduce risks and fall-related injuries."

Transport crashes accounted for 31 per cent of spinal injuries, with heavy vehicle crashes being the most common cause at 24 per cent.

Half of all transport injuries occurred 'off road' – that is, not on state roads. These injuries are most likely to be on farms or rural properties, meaning that injured victims are not covered by the compulsory third party (CTP) insurance scheme.

"Industry safety for heavy vehicle drivers has a long chain of responsibility and all parties need to work together to reduce overall risk," Dr. Sharwood added.

"Work-related traumatic spinal injuries represent a significant burden of cost and disability to the Australian workforce but they are preventable.

"Work-related traumatic spinal injuries are a current focus of Safe Work Australia policy aiming to reduce serious [injury](#) compensation claims by 30 per cent by 2022.

"There is an urgent need for more effective policies, risk management strategies and countermeasures for prevention."

More information: Lisa N. Sharwood et al. The Epidemiology, Cost, and Occupational Context of Spinal Injuries Sustained While 'Working for Income' in NSW: A Record-Linkage Study. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2018, 15(10), 2121; doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15102121. 27 September 2018

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