



Housekeeping

by Chris Montross

Housekeeping injuries: It's time we talk about the elephant in the room

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There's an elephant in today's hotel rooms that no one is really talking about. Despite numerous published reports by leading research institutions, organizations, and government health agencies regarding the dramatic increase in housekeeping injuries, no one has been able to effectively do anything about it. Maybe that's because, in truth, no one really knows what to do... until now.

Introduction

Over the past decade, hospitality providers have been engaged in an amenities competition and have taken drastic steps to remodel and revamp their suites and guestrooms to appeal to patrons desiring luxurious accommodations. According to the New York Times, "It is a competition in which the nation's premier hotels are trying to have their accommodations resemble royal bedrooms. Super thick mattresses, plush duvets and decorative bed skirts have been added, and five pillows rather than the pedestrian three now rest on a king-size bed."

Housekeepers, who clean 15-20 rooms a day under intense time pressures that characterizes hotel work are being adversely affected by the heavier, more cumbersome mattresses which have more than doubled in weight and thickness over the last ten years. As a result, housekeepers and room attendants are now 48% more likely to be injured on the job and 51% more likely to incur a serious, disabling injury than that of the average worker in the service industry.

Musculoskeletal injuries

The injuries most associated with housekeepers are known as musculoskeletal. Musculoskeletal (also known as soft tissue) simply means anything to do with the relationships of bones and various tissues – ligaments, tendons, and muscles – in the body. The injury occurs when the body part is called on to work harder, stretch farther, lift more or otherwise function at a greater level than it is prepared for, resulting in strains or tears to the soft tissue. Without enough time between exertions to heal and/or repair, the muscles, tendons and joints can be damaged. When the activity occurs repeatedly, the constant trauma may cause serious damage.

Repetitive Motion Injuries are soft tissue injuries that usually occur gradually over a long period of repeated exposure to low-level harmful conditions, but they can occur more quickly based on rate, intensity and severity of the exposure. In hospitality, musculoskeletal injuries account for nearly 62% of all housekeeping injuries and often result in loss of flexibility and strength, overexertion, muscle fatigue, and functional disability.

Injuries from bed making

When lifting, your back works on a lever principle of a 10 to 1 ratio to the object you are lifting. This means if you are lifting an object that weighs 10 pounds, 100 pounds of pressure is exerted on your back. Bed making duties, by nature, puts the back in its weakest position because it involves awkward lifting,



twisting and holding up the mattress while tucking in linens. Many of the motions used during bed making tasks require the muscles to work at the same time as they are being stretched making them more susceptible to risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders. To complicate matters further, many mattresses in today's hotels are placed close to sidewalls and night stands creating an even more awkward, dangerous and strenuous lift.

Recent detailed biomechanical evaluations of hotel working conditions confirmed bed making as the leading contributor to the risk of soft tissue injuries among housekeepers. Dr. William Marras, Professor and Director of the Institute for Ergonomics at Ohio State University, examined the hotel housekeeper job using a unique technology that combines both the tasks performed and the speed at which they must be done into one analysis. Using a patented tool called the Lumbar Motion Monitor, Dr. Marras found that the task of bed making has a 76% probability of yielding a high injury rate.



The ergonomic risk factors such as muscle force, repetitions, and awkward body postures are directly impacted by:

- The awkward postures, stretching and lifting required of traditional bed making methods.
- The increased weight of the mattress. The average mattress in today's hotels is in excess of 115 pounds with luxury mattresses weighing in excess of 250 pounds.
- The low position of the mattress, which on average is only 14 inches off the ground.
- The frequency a housekeeper is engaged in the task of changing linens. On average, hotel housekeepers service between 15–20 guestrooms each day, making up 25 beds, and spending four to five hours on that task alone. In a typical shift, he or she will lift mattresses 150 to 200 times for a total combined weight of over 16,000 pounds a day.

“The use of larger and heavier beds in the hospitality industry has increased loads on the lumbar spine making the risk of injury to the lower back more likely while performing bed making tasks.”

– P.D. Milburn & R.S. Barrett,
**Lumbosacral Loads In Bedmaking,
Applied Ergonomics**

The costs of injuries

Preventing soft tissue injuries is not only a safety challenge; it's a financial challenge. According to a study by the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), 91% of housekeepers report pain associated with their job duties. Of those, 67% have sought medical treatment for the pain. 38% have taken time off work as a result of the pain, and 35% have filed workers' compensation claims.

Worker compensation costs

Overall, insurance is the fastest growing expense for hotel operators increasing at rates 50% higher than that of labor and utility costs. Although workers' compensation rates vary by state and are impacted by local variables, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports repetitive motion injuries cost the hospitality industry \$500 million in compensation claims annually. As much as 70% of those claims are generated from housekeeping staff, and repetitive motion injuries have the highest reported total average for workers compensation cost per case ranging from \$14,000 to \$29,000.

Unions and workers' compensation

For hotels employing unionized labor, the statistics are even more dire. Union members are 5.7 times more likely to receive workers' compensation benefits than nonunion workers, and the benefits paid to union workers are on average 3.6 times larger than those paid to their nonunion counterparts. Union members are also 60% more likely to file an indemnity claim than nonunion workers.

Subsequently, unions have also urged OSHA to take a more active role in enforcing safer working environments arguing that daily room quotas and the lifting of heavy mattresses lead to accidents and workplace injuries. The complaints also allege that hotel employers are not providing adequate safety training, particularly relating to these ergonomic issues.

OSHA enforcement and fines

According to Gary Orr, a Certified Ergonomist who served as a key leader in setting OSHA's Ergonomic Standards, the heavy beds introduced industry-wide in the last decade place housekeepers at risk for serious injury. Orr's examination revealed the repeated motion of bending over to lift mattresses an average of 150 to 200 times a day scored a 1.29 on the Lifting Index exceeding the federal occupational standards set by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. A score of more than 1.0 means that the weight of the load is heavier than that which "nearly all healthy workers" could lift over a substantial period of time (e.g., up to 8 hours) without an increased risk of developing lifting related back pain.

As part of its increased enforcement efforts to reduce musculoskeletal injuries, OSHA has begun targeting ergonomic hazards in the hospitality industry. Already, several hotels have seen citations issued ranging from \$14,000 to \$50,000+.

Indirect costs

Most companies can usually define and analyze the direct costs associated with injuries, but it is the indirect costs that may be a little harder to identify. While the financial impact of the accident's direct cost depends on a company's specific workers' compensation program (the level of deductible, self-insurance, etc.), companies absorb all of the indirect costs of a workplace injury. Indirect costs such as lost productivity, turnover, overtime, value of staff time involved in the recruiting, hiring and training of replacement workers and reassigning remaining workloads and duties all directly affect the bottom line.

"Direct costs associated with occupational back injuries average \$37,000. Indirect costs associated with back injuries can range from \$147,000 to \$300,000."

Joseph Paduda, Managed Care and the Law of Unintended Consequences

Liberty Mutual, using its own data, and findings from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the National Academy of Social Insurance found that businesses face anywhere between \$2 to \$5 of indirect costs for each \$1 of direct costs.

Presenteeism

One such indirect cost comes in the form of "presenteeism". Presenteeism is defined as lost productivity of present employees who are impaired by and working with chronic pain. The loss in productivity includes: Additional time taken to complete tasks, decreased quality and quantity of work, lowered capacity for peak performance, and decreased initiative and motivation. According to Paul Hemp of the Harvard Business Review, chronic pain reduces an employee's performance by as much as thirty to fifty percent (30-50%), and employees working with pain experience an average of 4.6 hours per week of lost productive time.

Absenteeism

Another more quantitative indirect cost is absenteeism, which costs the hospitality industry over \$12 million in lost workdays every year. The average lost workdays among housekeepers is 14 days, which is twice the average of the service sector as a whole, and absences resulting from repetitive motion injuries have a median of 22 lost workdays.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that as many as 647,000 lost workdays were due to soft tissue injuries. This accounts for as much as 34% of all lost-workday injuries and illnesses in a given year and equates to \$1 of every \$3 spent for workers' compensation in that year.

"Hotel room cleaning has been shown over and over again to increase the risk of musculoskeletal disorders, such as low back pain and tendonitis."

—Laura Punnett, Sc.D., Occupational Epidemiologist and Ergonomist at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell

Employee turnover

Employee turnover is also a concern for the hospitality industry. The average turnover for all industries in the United States is about 12%. In the lodging industry, the average is above 78%, costing the industry \$140 billion annually.

Turnover costs include: (1) replacement costs (recruiting, hiring, and training newly hired housekeepers to a level of proficiency); (2) reduced service quality; and (3) poor morale and increased workload for remaining employees. Estimates place the cost to replace a single housekeeper to be between \$3,000 to \$10,000 per lost employee.

So, what can we do about the elephant in the room?

Many ideas have been posed such as simply reducing the workloads of housekeepers to the more radical ideas of California State Senate Bill 432 that would have required all California lodging establishments to replace their bottom flat sheets with fitted sheets. Either adoption could pose financial hardships for an industry still recovering from the recent economic downturn and may not wholly address or solve this issue. Estimates place the fitted sheet requirement at \$15 million for a statewide implementation, and little research has been done to suggest that a fitted sheet reduces these injuries and/or does not engender additional ergonomic hazards.

Instead of proposing a change in working or bedding requirements that has minimal benefits and is cost prohibitive, the hospitality industry would be far better served investing in the development and implementation of effective ergonomic systems that promote the use of safer body mechanics during the bed making chore.

Of course, the success of any program is greatly dependent on management's commitment to a sustained effort, allocation of resources, and the engagement of all individuals responsible for performing, supporting and supervising the task. But, companies committed to continuous safety and health improvements not only reduce the direct and indirect cost of injuries, they consistently outperform their competitors in operational efficiency, customer service and profitability. In fact, according to OSHA's Office of Regulatory Analysis, companies that implement effective safety and health programs can expect returns of \$4 to \$6 for every \$1 invested. ✧

(Chris Montross is vice president market & brand development of CKI Risk Solutions, which offers products and programs that solve problems and mitigate risks associated with housekeeping duties and guestroom maintenance. CKI Risk Solutions offers an injury prevention program to help eliminate injuries related to bed making by removing ergonomic risk factors with their patented tool and training methodology. The injury prevention program is designed to reduce direct costs, reduce indirect costs, improve productivity, improve employee relationships, improve relations with regulatory agencies, and increase your hotel's competitive advantage. For more information on CKI Risk Solutions, please contact them at 888-222-2217 or visit their website at: www.CKISolutions.US)