

# Is work making you ill?

## Police equipment such as body armour can take its toll on the human body and lead to back problems and sickness. Helen Gilbert reports

A recent survey by the Confederation of British Industry and Axa revealed workplace absence rose in 2006 as workers took an average seven days off sick, losing 175 million working days and costing the economy £13.4bn.

While the public sector has the highest average absence at nine days per employee - up half a day from 2005 - the police and probation services were found to be the worst offenders taking, on average, 13.5 days off sick a year. Perhaps not surprisingly, back problems were cited as the most significant cause of long term sickness absence.

### Equipment

It is something Nicola Slim, an officer with the Met Police based at Charing Cross, is all too familiar with. The 29 year old is a regular gym-goer, who has an impeccable sickness record. But she is not immune to aches and pains and the day after riot training is often an indicator that she has pushed her body to the limits.

According to PC Slim, the physical exercise is not the issue, but the awkwardness of carrying the riot shield is. "The shields are that weight and height for a reason, but I'm 5ft 7 in and only two inches taller than it," she tells *Police*.

"The 6ft 2 in blokes are fine carrying it, but, when I run and am tired, the bottom bit drags on the floor because I'm too short. My left hand side is the weaker side and when it's windy and flapping around it takes me with it. I ache everywhere afterwards especially my back, shoulder and bicep."

PC Slim would like forces to advise officers undertaking Level 2 training about the types of exercises they should do to build up strength beforehand. It is something Paul Morrissey, a registered osteopath of 14 years and Pilates' educator, recommends.

"The ergonomics of a riot shield for someone of a smaller size could lead to trauma such as shoulder

injuries, neck injuries and tendonitis," he explains. "Officers need to strengthen their body and after activity like this they need to do an appropriate cool down so they can stretch the various muscle groups to help reduce problems. This needs to be drummed into them."

Mr Morrissey, who runs The Osteopathic Clinic of Physical Medicine in Croydon and the Warlingham Green Osteopathic and Sports Injury Clinic in Surrey, counts over 100 officers among his clients. He has dealt with all manner of conditions over the years, but has noticed an increase in the number of officers with lower back, shoulder and neck problems, who often tell him protection vests are the cause.

"Some people are saying to me the distance between the vests and the belt is a problem. I understand some of the vests have changed recently, but they seem to be an issue. Most of the officers come to see me so they don't have to stay off work and they don't want it to go on their records. I treat them for micro-trauma - early joint injury - that could change into severe long-term joint damage if left untreated."

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According to Paul Lewis, secretary of the Police Federation's health and safety sub-committee, there have been reports that forces are not measuring their officers and giving them the correct fitting body armour.

"Some forces use a generic three size for both male and female which is inevitably going to cause officers problems," he says.

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According to the National Policing Improvement Agency, forces can commission designs for body armour



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and utility belts that fall within Home Office Scientific Development Branch specifications. But most subscribe to a national framework contract set up through the ACPO Uniform Working Group - which involves specialist garment manufacture designers to ensure the body armour fits comfortably.

The Metropolitan Police is one force to have changed the design of its 'MetVest' since it was originally introduced. Since 2002, officers have worn vests that are lighter in weight and have enhanced flexibility in the protective panels. Both men and women receive a personal fitting. "The MPS has over 90 different sizing combinations, with different design features that reflect the difference in shape between men and women," a spokesperson says.

But protection vests are not the only area of concern. The general fitness of officers after they have passed their probationary period has also been questioned. Mr Morrissey thinks that 80 per cent of the people he sees are not fit 'to some degree'. "I'm not saying that everyone should be walking around like a Greek Adonis, but they need to have sufficient core stability to withstand the stresses and strains of life as a police officer," he says.

He says annual fitness checks would benefit the service as 'potential problems could be nipped in the bud'. It is

something the NPIA is considering. A Police Advisory Working Party has been established to examine fitness standards and aims to introduce national fitness standards for specialist roles such as firearms officers and to consider in-service tests for serving police officers.

Mr Lewis is aware of a number of forces that are looking to put together their own fitness testing, but urges them to ask themselves whether officers are healthy enough to undertake the fitness test. Other considerations should be what they want to achieve from the testing, what will happen if an officer fails the test and whether work time would be allocated to achieve the standard required.

However, Mr Lewis is quite clear that health and safety needs to be pushed to the top of the agenda. "There is a move from some politicians and chief police officers to remove the service from health and safety," he says. "It is time they woke up and realised health and safety does not stop policing.

"They cite health and safety as impinging on police discretion and undermining an effective police service. With attitudes like that perhaps they would like the era of 'Life on Mars' back again. Health and safety... actually compliments an effective police service and assists in delivering for the communities we serve. If health and safety was removed it would have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of officers."

ACPO were unable to comment.

#### Top tips for health:

- Standing in one place, in a static position for a long time severely loads your discs, especially when you are carrying heavy equipment. The body is designed to move, so keep walking even if it is up and down the street.
- Standing posture: do not pull your shoulder blades together, instead lift your breast bone forward. Avoid slouching.
- Pull your naval towards your spine, maintaining the arch in your spine and reinforce these ideas when your body is in a more dynamic activity such as walking and running. This will access your support framework to help stabilise your spine.
- Stretch only following activity, it is not good to stretch a muscle.
- Review your fitness status. Could you do the bleep test as when you first graduated? Consider going to the gym or swimming twice a week.