Understanding The Requirements of Sign Language Interpreting:

**Introduction**

Sign language interpreting is an essential service to ensure the participation of Deaf people in work and other facets of society. Interpretation is both physically and mentally demanding:
- Daily job demands often depend on the type of interpretation and can vary from day to day, depending on conversations to be interpreted and legal or medical proceedings.
- Interpreters may work solo, or in a team with one or occasionally two other interpreters to alternate work and rest.
- Currently, the profession lacks evidence-based occupational health recommendations suited to interpreters.
- Purpose: determine the prevalence and pain/discomfort among sign language interpreters registered with the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVILC) and determine associated job demands.

**Methodology**

Members of the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVILC) were invited to fill out an online questionnaire related to their personal job demands, lifestyle, physical and mental stressors, and needs as an interpreter in Canada.
- Questionnaires were developed using modified versions of the pain and discomfort survey used by Fischer et al. (2007), the Angers–related Limitations at Work Questionnaire (Lerner et al. 1997) and the 2003 Statistics Canada – Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS).
- 36% of the 550 membership of AVILC responded.
- Potential respondents were invited to participate via the AVILC quarterly newsletter.
- The AVILC ethics committee encouraged responses to the questionnaire online, administered via the online service http://www.surveymonkey.com (Figure 1).
- Descriptive statistics on pain prevalence, discomfort, and occupational work factors.
- General feedback was provided to AVILC for use in regularly scheduled workshops.
- The questionnaire and research protocol was approved by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

**Results**

Figure 3 illustrates the high prevalence of pain and discomfort perceived by the interpreters.
- Mean discomfort levels on a 10 point visual analog scale (VAS) were significantly less (p≤0.05) at the time of the survey (5.5±2.3); however, a similar level of discomfort was felt during one hour of solo interpreting (5.1±2.9) and one full day of team interpreting (5.7±2.4).
- Interpreters in situations where a medical or judicial outcome will be decided was most stressful, interpreting in a team of 3 or more was least stressful (Figure 4).
- Interpreters generally agree their job requires a lot of physical efforts, although they moderately disagree they have good job security and job control (Figure 5).

**Discussion**

Sign language interpreting is both a physically and mentally demanding task.
- Similar injury proportions as published in the literature showing a prevalence of medically treated carpal tunnel of 13% (Smith, 1992) and 29–31% reporting pain in their neck and shoulder regions (Schwarze et al. 2000).
- High perceived pain and discomfort for interpreters highlighted by the mean VAS score of 5.5±2.7 on a 0–10 scale.
- Pain and discomfort were highest in the neck and right shoulder regions.
- Discomfort and pain may be a result of sustained low level static contractions, over time leading to tissue degeneration (Hegarty et al. 1987).
- Increased importance of interpreting situations (i.e. medical or legal) can increase perceived stress of interpreters and should be scheduled with adequate prep and rest time.
- Training is an effective way to help manage stress, perceived pain, and time with “hands-on in the air” interpreting.

**Job Demands**

Discipline and control findings support Dean and Pullard’s (2001) theory suggesting interpreters are at an elevated risk of both stress related and containe trauma based disorders due to high job demand and low job control.

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**Figure 3 – Body locations where interpreters reported the most discomfort at the time of the questionnaire.** The neck and right shoulder regions tend to be the locations of greatest discomfort. Mean discomfort on a VAS scale was 5.5 during one hour of solo interpreting, 5.7 during one day of solo interpreting, and 3.5 at the time of the questionnaire.

**Figure 4 – Interpreting situations rated as most or least stressful.** The impact of a medical or legal situation was reported as most stressful for near 40% of respondents. Working in a team of 3 or more was least stressful for nearly 30%.

**Figure 5 – Interpreter responses to job control and effort from Lerner et al. (1997) questionnaires.** Interpreters generally feel their job requires a lot of physical efforts (A), however they have moderate control (B&C) and job security (D).