Neil Jones examines the main hazards facing employees in the catering industry.

In the title sequence of the TV series MasterChef there is a wonderful snippet where Monica Galetti – Michel Roux Jr’s scary sous chef from his Le Gavroche restaurant – instructs one of the contestants: “Get that garnish on the plate NOW!” It’s as good a demonstration as any of the pressures faced by workers in the hotel and restaurant sector, which includes (amongst others) bars and catering businesses, with its constant need to meet customer demand at what sometimes might appear to be all costs.

The sector accounted for around 5% of all injuries to employees reported under RIDDOR in 2009/10. These included:
- 1,124 major injuries to employees, a rate of 65.2 per 100,000 employees
- 4,362 over-3-day injuries to employees – a rate of 252.9 per 100,000 employees

In 2009/10, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) showed that 0.7 million working days were lost in the sector due to workplace injury and work-related ill health.

**Slips & trips**

The highest proportion of reported major injuries to workers (575) in 2009/10 were caused by slips, trips and falls on level ground. The occupations most affected were kitchen assistants, chefs, and waiting staff. Slipping on a wet surface (water and other liquids) or other substance (grease, oil, food) was responsible for 238 of the major injuries reported. Tripping over an obstruction (furniture, small items, work materials, boxes, waste) accounted for 78 major injuries.

Concerns about the number of slips and
falls in professional kitchens has led the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to produce an excellent little leaflet – Stop slips in kitchens - A good practice guide – which has a colour-coded chart where you can identify the slip risks and prevention advice associated with different types of floor covering.

For example, both textured and smooth lino or vinyl sit firmly in the red zone on the chart, with the recommendation to replace these floor coverings with non-slip ones or, if that isn’t possible, to supply staff with slip-resistant footwear and adhere to a strict procedure in terms of spillage removal and cleaning.

The surface with the lowest slip risk (and therefore appearing in the green zone on the chart) is safety vinyl, where the surface has high levels of gritty particles. Even here, a rigorous cleaning regime is recommended.

The HSE information sheet – Slips and trips: The importance of floor cleaning – highlights the point that people rarely slip on clean dry floors but that floors in poor condition and where bad housekeeping is evident are responsible for most slip/trip injuries at work.

Control measures for the prevention of slips, trips and falls can be divided into:
- Management systems
- Contamination control
  - Preventing contamination
  - Choose the right cleaning method
  - Make sure cleaning doesn’t introduce an additional slip risk
- Obstacle removal
  A good cleaning system should involve:
  - Planning to make sure the correct cleaning regime is chosen for the type of floor, taking into account how the floor is used, by whom (for example, some people are more at risk such as the visually impaired and the elderly), when it’s used and contaminants present.
  - Consider also how spillages will be cleaned up between the scheduled whole floor cleaning.
  - Organising the work and consulting with staff to make sure the planning stage is implemented.
  - Controls to ensure that working practices and processes are being carried out properly, for example, that access is prevented to wet, smooth floors.
  - Monitoring and reviewing to identify any improvements that can be made to the cleaning system.

Effective training and supervision is essential to make sure the standard of cleaning is correct. Training should match the individual, the environment and equipment used. If any of these factors change, training should be reviewed. Cleaners should be encouraged to report any difficulties in carrying out their work. Floors and equipment should be well maintained.

MSDs

The second most common type of injury in the hotel and restaurant sector are musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), mainly resulting from lifting and carrying loads, pushing, pulling and handling materials.

In 2008/09, according to the Labour Force Survey, 1,200 in every 100,000 employees in the sector believed they were suffering from an MSD caused or made worse by their work.

Most of this type of injury can be avoided by training staff in proper lifting techniques, by the use of handling aids and by raising awareness of the risk. In addition, early detection and reporting of aches and pains is crucial.
A manual handling risk assessment should look at:
- The handling tasks staff are having to do
- The loads they are lifting
- The environment they are working in
- The individual capabilities of each worker

Staff and safety representatives should be involved in conducting the risk assessment and records should be kept of the findings of the risk assessment and any action taken to control the risks identified.

Controlling MSD risks

The first priority is to avoid manual handling if possible; this might mean re-organising the layout of the kitchen to avoid unnecessary stretching or lifting or, for example, the use of a dishwashing machine.

Tasks should be considered with a view to reducing the amount of twisting, bending, stooping, stretching, pushing and pulling that might be involved. However, there will be times when the task cannot be avoided and in these circumstances consideration needs to be given to whether mechanical aids such as large mixer bowls on wheeled dollies, sack trucks and four-wheeled trolleys could be used.

Dish and pot washing can cause particular MSD problems as many of the tasks involve repeated lifting of full dish racks and/or heavy pots. Back injuries are common because of stretching across sinks or work surfaces and it is recommended that dishwashing machines, conveyors and rollers be used.

Cleaning is also an activity where MSD injury is a significant risk. Many cleaning tasks will involve reaching areas which are relatively inaccessible. Risks can be reduced by using long handled brushes and choosing cleaning tools that have soft rubber-like handles that require less grip force to hold properly.

Any changes to a work task to avoid or reduce manual handling must be monitored to check they are having a positive effect. If they are not reducing the risk effectively, alternatives must be considered.

Skin conditions

The catering industry has a high rate of reported cases of dermatitis.

Irritant contact dermatitis is usually the result of either a single heavy or prolonged minor exposure to an irritant, eg. in this sector, cleaning materials and chemicals and some food stuffs such as garlic or onions.

Allergic contact dermatitis occurs when someone has an allergic reaction to an irritant and become sensitised. In catering, irritants can include foodstuffs such as shellfish and flour.

Irritant dermatitis can be exacerbated by wet work, where hands are immersed in water for more than two hours per day or are washed more than 20 times per day (particularly in combination with soaps and detergents). Wet work can be reduced by automating some processes (such as peeling), handling food with tongs and/or buying in ready prepared ingredients.

Washing up can be avoided by using dishwashing machinery or, alternatively, using tools for cleaning and pot washing.

The use of gloves for cleaning, food preparation and wet work means the hands are protected, although the use of gloves should be accompanied by the correct procedures such as taking proper glove breaks, washing the hands before and after glove use, and using a moisturising cream pre work and at the end of the working day.

Regular checks for dermatitis should be made by both the employee and their supervisor. Damaged skin can be more difficult to clean properly and the affected areas of...
skin can become infected with the potential to contaminate food. (HSE has produced a free poster highlighting the importance of checking skin for signs of dermatitis, see: www.hse.gov.uk/skin/professional/posters.htm)

Thermal comfort

Kitchens are hot environments but, conversely, kitchen staff can be exposed to extremely cold temperatures when retrieving food supplies from large walk-in freezers.

- Kitchens should be provided with good ventilation systems, whilst cooker hoods and fume extraction systems need regular cleaning to maintain air quality. Where appropriate, air conditioning should be installed.
- Workers need educating about the symptoms of heat stress and should be encouraged to consume regular small quantities of cool water or non-fizzy soft drinks and to take their rest breaks in a cooler environment – although not the walk-in freezers!

Knives

Knife accidents are common in the catering industry, with most accidents being cuts to the non-knife hand or fingers. The HSE has some sensible ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ on its website (www.hse.gov.uk/catering/knives.htm), these include:

- Do train employees in the safe use of knives and safe working practices when sharpening knives
- Use a knife suitable for the task and the food being cut
- Store knives securely after use, eg. in a scabbard or container
- Use protective equipment as required. For deboning, it is recommended that a suitable protective glove is worn on the non-knife hand and a chain mail or similar apron is worn
- Don’t leave knives loose on worktop surfaces where they can be accidentally pushed off
- Use a knife as a can opener
- Carry knives while carrying other objects

Resources

- STEP (Slips and Trips eLearning Package) is an interactive learning tool designed to help employers assess and manage slip and trip hazards in the workplace. The tool is free and can be accessed online at: www.hse.gov.uk/slips/step/index.htm
- HSE’s Manual Handling Assessment Chart (MAC) is a web-based tool, which simplifies risk assessments by showing how manual handling tasks can be broken down into their component parts and scored using a ‘traffic light’ system. It helps identify the riskier elements of a task so that effort to reduce the potential of injury can be better targeted. See: www.hse.gov.uk/msd/mac/

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References
