

**Marjeta Cotman, Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs
representing the EU Slovenian Presidency**

**CLOSING EVENT FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK
BILBAO - 26 February 2008**

Esteemed participants and guests of this year's closing event,

I am greatly honoured to be able to welcome you here on behalf of the Republic of Slovenia, the holder of the European Union Presidency, and on behalf of the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs to today's closing event, which has been organised by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, and at which we will talk about the challenges and approaches towards dealing with the issue of musculoskeletal disorders.

The field of ensuring safety and health at work is very important, since it demands the committed cooperation of employers, workers and policy-makers. A number of years have now passed since the enactment of the main regulations concerning safety and health at work. Data on the state of safety and health at work in the EU Member States, including Slovenia, indicate that considerable effort will still need to be invested in this area. Indeed we are living in a world of rapid changes, at a time of globalisation, which affects workers, employers and the whole of our society. Changes will not be simple, since they frequently involve a change in our way of life. We must strive to preserve the European social model and to adapt to the changing circumstances of the economic and social environment. The new European strategy for safety and health at work is a good basis for this. This strategy includes an ambitious target, whereby on the EU level injuries at work should be reduced by 25% by 2012.

In this the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work will have to continue playing an important part in collecting and analysing data and research. Here of course we cannot forget about the gathering, evaluation and spreading of best practices in the field of safety and health at work, which are among the key activities of the Agency. Best practices are indeed an excellent source of information about how to improve the situation in the area of safety and health at work with the most rational costs, primarily in medium-sized and small enterprises.

We have observed that in companies with large numbers of employees, the state of safety and health at work is satisfactory. There is quite a different picture, however, at small and medium-sized companies, which frequently regard this subject mainly as a large and unnecessary cost. These employers usually try to meet the minimum demands of regulations formally in the cheapest and quickest way possible, and this means that quality and the preventive aspect of safety and health measures are brought into question. Only timely and correct preventive action based on an appropriate risk assessment can contribute in any significant way to reducing the number of injuries and diseases related to work, as well as the costs for employers, workers and the state. To this end special attention needs to be focused on all levels at raising awareness and strengthening the culture of safety and health at work,

something which is helped significantly by good information and the spreading of good practices and their transferability.

The content of the latest campaign of the “European week of safety and health at work” was not selected at random. Musculoskeletal disorders today rank amongst the most frequent work-related health issues in Europe, and represent one of the biggest problems for workers. They affect not just the quality of work, but also the quality of life. A quarter of all workers in the European Union complain of back pain and almost the same number complain of muscular pain.

The latest campaign has attempted to promote an integrated approach to dealing with the problem of musculoskeletal disorders, and this has included both the prevention of such disorders and efforts towards workers suffering from musculoskeletal disorders being kept in companies, rehabilitated and reintegrated into the work process. Workers suffer back and muscle pain in all sectors of the economy, but the highest incidence of such disorders is in the farming and construction sectors. Musculoskeletal disorders can affect any worker. They can be prevented or reduced by taking into account the valid legislation in the field of safety and health at work and by observing the practical guidelines and solutions that have resulted from best practices. Appropriate risk assessment, effective safety and health measures and regular monitoring of these measures contribute significantly to maintaining worker health. It is therefore no coincidence that risk assessment itself will be the substance of the next campaign.

The European campaign opens up broad possibilities for the inclusion of everyone affected in any way by safety and health at work. Employers, workers, worker representatives for occupational safety and health, technical staff, policy-makers and other experts dealing with measures to prevent musculoskeletal disorders at the workplace have all shown great interest in cooperating in this year’s campaign. In this way they have opened up broad possibilities for small and medium-sized employers to recognise that through little cost and tiny innovations they can contribute to improving working and ergonomic conditions, and in this way reduce the number of work-related injuries and diseases.

We are convinced that this year’s European campaign has contributed to making life at the workplace for the European worker more tolerable, less burdensome and healthier, and that the results of the common European campaign will contribute to a reduction in the number of injuries at work and occupational diseases. On the other hand the accessibility and availability of innovative technical and commercial solutions through best practices, both on the national and European level, will contribute to a general raising of professional knowledge and human culture in the area of safety and health at work. And for the companies that contributed these solutions, their commercial standing will be enhanced.

In this spirit may I wish you further successful work in the area of safety and health at work and in all other areas that make the job of the European worker easier, less stressful, healthier and less vulnerable to injury.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate once again all those of you who participated in any way in the preparation of this year’s campaign for your successful work, as well as this year’s prize winners.

Thank you.