

Jukka Takala:

Opening speech for the closing event of EW2007

Thank you, Katya.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to everyone gathered here in Bilbao for the closing event of the 'Lighten the Load' campaign.

A campaign which has been launched in June last year in Brussels – by Mr. Vladimír Špidla, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, whom we are very happy to welcome again today here in Bilbao. We also counted on the strong support by the German EU Presidency – and today, the Slovenian EU Presidency is represented by Mrs Marjeta Cotman, Slovenian Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs accompanied by Mr Peter Reberc, Slovenian Ambassador to Spain. Thank you for coming!

We are also honoured to welcome Mr Joseba Azkarraga, Basque Minister for Justice, Employment and Social Security, as well as the Directors of the European Parliament Office and the European Commission Representation in Spain, Mr Ignacio Samper and Mr Jose Luis González Vallvé.

Then, let me not forget our social partners – on the European level represented by Kris De Meester from BUSINESS EUROPE and John Monks, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation who cannot be here personally, but will speak to us via a video message later on.

And last but not least, welcome to all of you here in the room – not only for coming to Bilbao and discussing with us today the very latest trends and challenges around the most prevalent work-related disease: Musculoskeletal Disorders – or MSDs in short –, but also for supporting us over the past months during the 'Lighten the Load' campaign.

In fact, as part of the campaign, several hundred events have been organised by focal points and other organisations and partners throughout Europe. They have been all extremely creative – as you can see outside in the exhibition area and as you will hear and see this afternoon in a presentation that will take you on a video and image tour around Europe. This year, the Agency offered all companies, associations and organisations who were active during the 'Lighten the Load' campaign a special 'Certificate of Participation' to recognise their dedication to occupational safety and health at work. For the first time, we also launch a prize draw among those who downloaded this 'Certificate of Participation'. The winner was offered a two-day-trip to Bilbao for two people, and we are happy to welcome also Mr Rui Tomás Soares Gouveia and his wife from Portugal.

The high level of participation over the past months – and especially during the European Week which traditionally takes place in the second half of October – reflects the very real threat MSDs continue to pose to healthy workplaces.

This closing summit and conference offers occupational safety and health experts and other interested parties the first chance to hear about the successes and lessons of the campaign.

We have a very rich and busy day ahead of us. To start proceedings, a number of important speakers — including Commissioner Spidla, the Slovenian minister Mrs Marjeta Cotman, the Basque minister, Joseba Azkarraga, and our social partners will be offering their thoughts on the 'Lighten the Load' campaign and the issue of musculoskeletal disorders in general.

After that, Jean-Jacques Atain Kouadio, from the French Institut national de recherche et de sécurité (INRS) will make a pertinent presentation full of videos and hands-on examples that will serve as a bridge to the three different workshops on MSD statistics, prevention and rehabilitation.

After lunch we will be hearing reports from the morning workshops, presentations from Good Practice Award winners and keynote speeches from MSD specialists. At the end of the afternoon, we will be presenting the Good Practice Awards and honour their winners for their outstanding and innovative contributions to the prevention of work-related MSDs. It promises to be an informative and rewarding day before we can relax at a drinks reception and buffet in the early evening.

I would like to make just a few brief observations on MSDs myself – as I said the most common of all work-related health problems. Across the 27 EU Member States, 25% of workers complain of backache and 23% report muscular pains. MSDs reduce company profitability and add to the social costs of government, but they also reduce the employability and working capacity of those affected. Tackling MSDs, therefore, is not only a part of good management, it is also a moral and ethical duty of all decision makers in and around the workplace.

MSDs affect all workers: young and old; men and women. It is not a phenomenon that is restricted to older male workers in manual jobs – as many might believe. Physically demanding tasks such as working in awkward positions, handling heavy loads, prolonged standing and sitting, and repetitive work appear to be common among young workers which mean that they are at considerable risk of developing MSDs. It is estimated that nearly 4 million young workers in the EU under the age of 25 have backpain. (EU data)

If MSDs do not respect age, they do not respect gender either. According to recent surveys, in the health care sector for example, an estimated 6-7 million women lift or move people and 3-4 million report backpain. In the retail sector, about 4 to 6 million women have to carry or move heavy loads, and about 10-11 Mio women are exposed to prolonged standing or walking. (EU data)

What are the solutions? Well, let me point to our Agency's most recent publication Work-related MSDs: Prevention Report which sets out the latest scientific evidence on the issue. It suggests, for example, that the introduction of additional breaks into repetitive work will significantly decrease MSDs and may be achievable without loss of productivity. It also emphasizes that only a multidisciplinary approach – including organisational, technical and personal measures – will succeed in effectively preventing MSDs. One thing seems to be crystal clear: Workers, employers and

occupational safety and health professionals must work hand in hand.

You are all specialists in the field and you know about the issues and challenges – so it's not as if I would have revealed to you the discovery of the philosopher's stone. But I think it is important to set out the European perspective, the political side of this perspective will be given in a moment by Commissioner Spidla. But now, I first want to give the floor to Marjeta Cotman, Minister of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, who is representing the Slovenian Presidency of the EU.