



The Impact of Milking on People

1. Introduction

Although milk harvesting involves the cows, people and facilities – getting the 'people' factors right is vitally important for a sustainable system. This Quick Note examines ways to lessen the impact of the milking task on the people that do it.

2. Interpretation and relevance to Australian conditions

Milk harvesting activities account for about 50% of the total labour requirements in dairy farming and so are a key part of the business. Milking is still a major part of Australian dairy farmers' lifestyles although around 55% use employed labour to milk their cows for some milkings over the year. Making milking an easier, safer and more pleasant place to work should make existing systems more sustainable and make it easier to find additional labour. This has been identified as a primary goal of the Australian dairy industry.

3. The important factors

Working environment

Working in a pleasant environment can really help motivation and reduce fatigue. Smart dairy design can help provide a comfortable temperature. Features such as fans, moveable wall panels, sprinklers, heated floor slabs are worth considering. Good (artificial) lighting and removing noise from the dairy also make a big difference. Damp clothing is uncomfortable to wear so invest in good quality protective equipment and cushioned boots. Look at ways to reduce dust if feeding in the dairy and reduce exposure to teat disinfectant aerosols by using long hand-held wands, teat dip cups or remote auto teat sprayers.

Physical

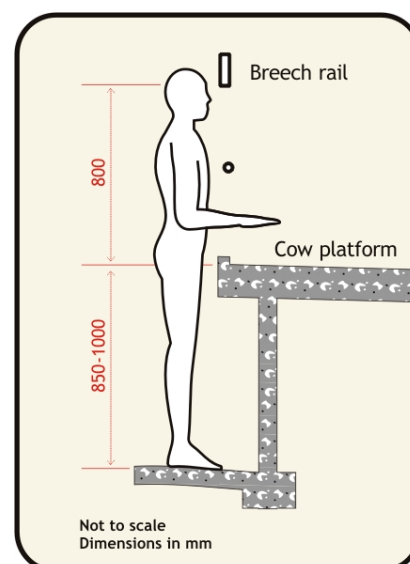
Keeping the work in front, between shoulder and mid-thigh height, reduces the chances of back injuries. The aim is to work in a position that maintains the natural lumbar curve in your lower back.

Bending, twisting and loading are the main risk factors that cause back injuries. Applied individually they each weaken the back but if all done at the same time they can make the back 37 times weaker, greatly increasing the chance of injury. Set up your workplace to reduce the requirements for bending, twisting or loading. Look at ways to reduce the need to lift heavy items, move your feet rather than twist your back, keep the load in front and close to your body, during long shifts – change tasks around to give the muscles a break.

An important thing to remember is that back injuries generally do not happen suddenly. Injuries to the back are often a result of many years of wear and tear, making the discs between the vertebrae weak and prone to rupture.

Psychological

The 'mental' impacts of milking are just as important as the physical ones. Milking has a good mix of rewards and if these match the needs of the people involved then it can really help to motivate them. For example, having pride in your work is enough for some but others need periodic positive feedback from their peers. The immediate rewards



of a pleasant milking environment are obvious but what about longer-term benefits like less stress, better relationships with family and other workers?

A bit of stress is healthy, promotes performance and a sense of wellbeing. Setting achievable targets and taking a moment to reflect when they are reached can be a powerful motivator. However, too much stress or long-term fatigue can reduce a person's ability to cope with situations that they encounter every day. This can lead to anxiety and depression.

Automation and sustainable milking practices

Automation can be very useful in reducing the stress of milking by reducing the number of tasks the operator has to complete in a given time. Automatic Cluster Removers are especially useful in this regard. However automation can be misused – to set the pace of work for the milkers. People are more at risk of long-term soft tissue and repetitive strain type conditions when controlled by machine pacing. Muscles get tight and people become stressed in these situations. Let the people control the pace of the work and review this often. Allow some flexibility for people – they are not machines.

Safety

It is a minimum legal requirement to provide a safe working environment and safe systems of work. However many other benefits are obtained by promoting healthy, enjoyable work practices and lifestyle, beyond those required by law. Well designed facilities and work practises can achieve both.

A recent survey of Australian dairy farmers by CowTime found that 1 in 10 had suffered an injury during milking in the last 12 months, with the injury forcing 9 farmers (3%) to miss more than 4 weeks of milkings.

4. Expected benefits of reducing the impact of milking on people:

- Making milk harvesting easier or more pleasant
- Easier to find labour, less labour turnover
- Improved occupational health & safety
- Happier milkers and improved sustainability of the milk harvesting system.

5. Potential issues with implementation

- Increased care and attention to 'people' management issues may require a different set of skills
- Old habits are hard to break so changes in workplace design may be required to encourage different work practices – this may need a fresh look at the dairy work practices and/or a degree of capital investment.

6. Robustness of this information

This information is based on the advice of an occupational therapist and ergonomist experienced in the assessment of agricultural work and workplaces. Very few studies have specifically addressed milk harvesting conditions on Australian dairy farms although some overseas literature is available.

This Pits and People information is not intended as comprehensive occupational health and safety advice regarding the workplace (for example machinery) but advice that applies to the people factors in the dairy.

7. References and further reading

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Victorian WorkCover Authority, <http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au>
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