Chapter 8: Health and safety

Contents

Introduction

This chapter is not intended as an exhaustive guide to all aspects of health and safety in the church. It is simply a guide to those aspects which are of particular relevance to the organist.

Health and safety is the obligation to take reasonable steps to prevent injury. Its obligation is both legal and moral, with the former attempting to enforce the latter. Compliance demonstrates a Christian commitment to look after each other. At a mundane level, it helps the church avoid claims and ensures compliance with insurance policies.

Many of our churches were built long before there was such awareness of safety, and so there can be particular problems applying modern standards to old churches. Also many churches are listed buildings. However, local authorities are sympathetic and can usually find satisfactory ways of making adaptations without undue damage.

Almost anything can be dangerous if improperly used. A pencil can blind someone, for example. There is a balance of duty between the individual to exercise personal responsibility and the occupiers of premises to avoid potential dangers. For this reason, health and safety legislation is full of provisions using the word "reasonable". Procedures are laid down by parliament and other authoritative bodies not to prevent all accidents, but to indicate a standard where the balance is between collective and personal responsibility. Following such procedures not only helps avoid accidents but helps avoid claims should an accident happen.

While most health and safety issues at church are the responsibility of the churchwardens and church council (or equivalents in non-Anglican churches), safety is a matter for everyone. In particular, an organist must consider:

- candles;
- fire;
- cassocks;
- stairs;
- galleries;
- electricity;
- shelves;
- pianos;
- light;
- heating.

Each of these is further discussed later.

Proper precautions not only avoid accidents, but prevent the pendulum attitude. This is where no-one takes an issue seriously until something happens, and then

everything is banned. It is much better to have a balanced approach from day one.

Legal Basis

The legal basis for health and safety derives from four main sources of law:

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974;
- occupier's liability;
- negligence; and
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

There are, however, many other aspects of law which can be relevant.

An organist is a representative of the church, and therefore can be liable under the law as a manager.

Health and safety at work

The main law is Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. This is designed to ensure that workplaces are safe for employees. If the church employs five or more people, it must have a written health and safety policy. The Health and Safety Executive recommends that volunteers are treated the same as paid employees.

Previously there were various regulations concerning factories and offices, which imposed a ragbag of conditions on the employer. The 1974 Act approaches the subject differently and puts a duty on employers and employees together to create a safe environment.

The general duty is summarised in section 2 of the Act, which imposes a general duty on the employer to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of employees with regard to:

- safe plant and safe systems of work;
- safe handling, storage, maintenance and transport of articles and substances;
- necessary information, instruction and supervision;
- a safe place of work with safe access and egress; and
- a safe working environment with adequate welfare facilities.
- having a written safety policy.

The Act has been complemented by many regulations covering many aspects of health and safety.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is responsible for enforcing the Act and its regulations. Health and safety inspectors have the right to enter and inspect premises, see records, examine equipment, interview anyone, and take other reasonable steps. From 1 April 1990, local authorities are responsible for checking churches.

An inspector may serve an improvement notice which gives the employer at least 21 days notice to remedy a shortcoming. A prohibition notice takes effect immediately, unless it is a deferred prohibition notice. Inspectors may institute prosecution if there is no compliance with notices.

An inspector will first check what employees the church has. The legal adviser to General Synod has stated that volunteers playing the organ are not covered by this Act, however there is no reason why an unpaid organist should be put at greater risk than a paid organist.

In the Church of England, building work must also comply with the faculty jurisdiction, see page xxx.

Occupier's liability

A separate body of law relates to the liability someone has from occupying premises, whether as owner, tenant or licensee.

This imposes a general liability on the occupier to ensure that premises are safe, and creates a possible liability to anyone on the premises. This liability is not limited to those who are legally on the premises. In extreme circumstances, this can create a liability towards trespassers and even burglars.

The two main Acts are the Occupiers Liability Act 1957 which created the liability for employees and visitors. The Occupiers Liability Act 1984 extends that liability to others who are on the premises. This Act also requires notices for any temporary hazard, such as a slippery floor just after washing.

Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969 requires employers to have at least £5 million insurance for injury or illness sustained by an employee. The certificate of insurance must be conspicuously displayed.

Negligence

Negligence is a tort (a civil wrong) for which it is necessary to prove two things:

- that you owed a duty of care to someone; and
- that you failed to discharge that duty.

The failure to discharge the duty can involve little more than thoughtlessness or carelessness, that is not realising that there could be a danger or not taking sufficient steps to prevent it.

Where the negligence arose from not complying with the terms of a contract, it is usually easier to sue for breach of contract.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

This Act became law on 2 December 1996. It imposes a general duty on service providers not to treat disabled people less favourably than able people. It was introduced in three stages.

From 1 October 1999, service providers must make reasonable adjustments to how they provide services.

From 1 October 2004, all service providers, including churches, must make reasonable adjustments to the physical premises. This includes provisions such as handrails, hearing loops and ramps.

Organists must similarly be prepared to adapt any choir procedures to accommodate disabled choristers. Examples may include:

- excusing a person with walking difficulties from processing;
- providing enlarged music for those with sight problems;
- allowing a wheelchair-bound chorister to sit at the front.

A church should also make available large print sizes of hymn books and produce large print versions of service books.

Specific Concerns

Candles

As a minimum, candles should:

- not be carried while lit, unless designed for that purpose;
- be in a secure holder of the right size;
- placed so they cannot fall over;
- not left lit and unattended without a glass chimney;
- not available to unsupervised children; and
- kept distant from hair, robes, foliage and paper.

A candle flame burns at 1000°C. It will ignite flammable material within 1½ times the height of the flame, and scorch material further away.

It is unlikely to be a good idea to have lit candles in the choir stalls where the risk of igniting hair and paper is great. Girls' long hair often has wispy strands which can easily ignite and set hair on fire. If quick enough, a hair fire can safely be smothered with bare hands, but don't take the risk of fire in the first place. Similarly, a surplice can easily catch in an open flame.

Care should be taken to acquire the right type of candle. Slow-burning candles are the safest, and are usually more economical than cheaper but faster-burning candles. Candles and holders of various types are readily available from suppliers such as the Church Purchasing Scheme.

If the congregation must handle lit candles, they must be of a suitable type with adequate protection. Some candles are specifically made for this purpose. If children hold candles, they must be properly supervised.

In the Church of England there is unrepealed 19th century case law that the ceremonial use of candles is illegal. For example, the case Sumner v Wix [1870] held that holding lighted candles each side of the minister while the gospel is read was an illegal addition to ceremonial. However, several modern liturgies from the Alternative Service Book 1980 onwards include candles in the rubric. Candles purely for illumination have always been legal.

Fire

Guidance on fire precautions for the church are contained in a free Council for the Care of Churches leaflet, available from Church House Bookshop.

A main concern about fire is not to block exits. This is particularly relevant for concerts; the audience must be able to go straight to the exit without having to negotiate kettledrums or loudspeaker cabinets first.

Churches are generally exempt from fire regulations while having services but not for concerts. However good practice is that the same standards of compliance apply at all times. The local chief fire officer is able to give free advice, which should be followed.

You should know where the fire extinguishers are. There should be between one and four depending on the size of the church. There should be a carbon dioxide extinguisher by the organ console. This and dry powder extinguishers are the only type safe to use on electrical appliances, but powder and pipe organs do not mix – it can cost £8,000 or more to clean out the powder if an extinguisher is discharged by the organ.

Ensure that you have adequate exits even while rehearsing. One side door down some stone steps is not enough for a rehearsal with 50 singers.

For regular practices, you should include a fire drill at least once a year.

If the fire alarm goes off, never assume that it is an accident or a drill. Evacuate the building immediately, tell people where to assemble, do not take belongings with you and call the fire brigade.

Flammable material, such as paper and old robes, should not be stored in the organ chamber. If a fire starts, flue pipes, not surprisingly, act as flues.

Cassocks

A cassock should be at least three inches above the floor and no lower. This should reach no lower than the ankle so the chorister cannot trip while processing.

If you have children in the choir, cassocks should be checked every year against the child's growth, and changed or adjusted as necessary. Do not be tempted to give a child a long cassock to "grow into". If it reaches below the ankles, take up the bottom hem, which is a simple job for someone adept at such things. The hem can always be lowered again.

Stairs

Sometimes a choir may need to negotiate a user-unfriendly staircase, such as a stone spiral staircase to a tower or gallery. You must:

- allow adequate time for ascending and descending, so there is no rush;
- if possible, put on robes after climbing stairs;
- if choristers must climb stairs in robes, tell them to lift up their cassocks a few inches to avoid tripping;
- carry as few books as possible; and
- have at least two adults, preferably able-bodied men, bringing up the rear, in case anyone does slip.

Organ chambers are not designed for public access. It is advisable for the organist to see the pipes and workings of the organ at least once. While it is good practice to encourage interest in organs and how they work, be very cautious about allowing people into the organ chamber. Any person let in must be supervised by the organist, organ tuner or other experienced people. If using a ladder, take extra care with one person remaining on the ground. There are specific safety guidelines on the use of ladders.

Section K1 of the building regulations gives these requirements for the building of staircases in institutional buildings. Building regulations apply only to what may be built, not to existing staircases, but give an indication of what is considered safe. There are further regulations for spiral staircases.

Galleries

Provision K2 of the Building Regulations 2000 requires that a gallery should have a protecting wall up to 1.1 metres (3 feet 7½ inches) high. This only applies to new buildings, but indicates what may be regarded as safe. (Similar sentiments are found in Deuteronomy 22:8.) A rail should be fitted to an existing gallery of less than 1.1 metres. The wall should either be solid, or at least designed so that a child cannot slip through it.

Choristers, particularly children, should be told not to stand near the edge, not to lean over, and not to lark around.

Electricity

Electrical work is subject to many specific regulations, particularly Electricity at Work Regulations. In general, fixed electrical work must be inspected every five years. There are regulations produced by The Institution of Electrical Engineers, British Standard BS 7671 and Part P of the Building Regulations. General guidance is available in the book Wiring in Churches published by Church House Publishing in 1997.

From 1 January 2005, electrical work in a home or garden must generally be undertaken by an approved electrician and not by yourself or an unapproved friend. This restriction does not apply to:

- adding power points to an existing circuit (unless in a kitchen or bathroom);
- maintenance work; or
- fixing appliances, such as changing a plug.

Strictly, these regulations do not apply to churches, but it is considered good practice that the same standard is followed there as for homes. If the church engages an approved electrician (as it should), that electrician is obliged to follow BS 7671 and other regulations. A church which permits electrical work by someone not approved to do it could find itself in difficulties with its insurance company and its own church authorities.

The main concerns for electricity are that:

- trailing wires are fixed;
- the system is not overloaded;
- connections are secure; and
- power points near the floor are covered.

Perhaps the most important consideration for an organist is that all trailing wires are securely fixed to the floor across the whole length where anyone may walk. There are special cable protectors made for this. In 2005, the cost approximated to £10 per metre, though with regular re-use this can become cheaper than tape. It is also much cheaper than an accident. Masking tape or gaffer tape (also known as elephant tape, duck tape and by other names) is widely used, and is better than nothing, but it will not properly protect cables from stiletto and similar heels or other forms of mechanical damage. Without any protection, people will easily trip over a loose wire. Unused lengths of extension leads should be coiled and kept away from any passage.

The organist may know where the church's fuse box is, but should only change a fuse if he can do so properly. Modern fuse boxes are circuit breakers which you simply switch back on. If a fuse keeps blowing, there is a problem with the electrical circuit somewhere. The organist must always report a blown fuse to the appropriate church officer, as this could indicate a problem with the electrical supply. The organ and fixed electrical heaters usually have their own power supply.

For normal 240-volt mains electricity, one kilowatt uses about four amps. Mains plugs are fitted with 13-amp fuses, though lower fuses are available. Thirteen amps is sufficient for just over three kilowatts. Power points are usually on circuits which typically have a total output of 30 amps. It is possible for ten amps in a 13-amp power point to overload the system if you already have 25 amps on other points. Unless running many free-standing heaters, it is most unlikely that you will ever get near that limit to overload a system. If you do have a power cut-out, there is probably a problem elsewhere, for which the church should get an electrician.

Electrical heaters are the heaviest users of electricity; a one-bar fire, fan heater or electric kettle uses one kilowatt. Amplifiers use little electricity. A deafening 100-watt amplifier uses about one fifth of one kilowatt. A standard 100-watt light bulb uses one tenth of a kilowatt. Electric keyboards, hi-fi systems, computers and clocks use tiny amounts of electricity.

Provided the total kilowattage does not exceed the total for the power point or circuit, there is no limit to the number of plugs that may be connected to a single power point using adaptors and gangboards. Gangboards are preferable to adaptors.

Note that some modern organs are vulnerable to power surges in the mains supply in the same way that computers are. This is because they use similar circuitry. A power supply to a modern organ will need a surge protector, which is simply a special type of plug or adaptor, readily available from electrical stores.

All electrical connections should be properly made and protective covers securely fixed. It is worth learning to wire up a plug properly; it is not difficult. A badly-wired plug is more likely simply to stop working than be dangerous, but that is also a situation to avoid. Plugs must be securely closed with no wires other than the outer cable showing. Poorly wired plugs in amplification systems can cause sound problems.

Portable electrical appliances, including heaters, kettles, amplifiers, keyboards etc. should be "PAT tested" on a regular basis, dependant on usage. The regulations do not state any specific interval, but give criteria to allow the user to decide.

For organs, Ecclesiastical Insurance Group offers this guidance:

- do not tolerate any amateur wiring;
- console lights must be permanently wired;
- console lights must be as low a wattage as possible;
- it must not be possible to put music, hymn lists or other paper on top of a console light;
- maintenance lights should be fitted above each section of pipework;
- maintenance lights should preferably be fluorescent (less heat);
- maintenance light switches should be at the entrance of the organ chamber;
- a wandering lead from a 13-amp socket should be fitted in the lower section of the organ, and be fitted with a proper inspection lamp (see below);
- any portable heater should be a convector or fan-assisted type, fitted with a thermostatic cut-out;
- a portable heater should be unplugged when not in use;
- inspection, maintenance and repair of an organ should be entrusted to an experienced builder who has appropriate knowledge of its electrical system;
- organ maintenance should not overlook the blower and humidifier which need to be examined periodically;
- a humidifier should be inspected every six months;
- the organ console should have an "power on" indicator light.

In addition, the Institute of British Organbuilding recommends the use of low voltage (50 volts) inspection lamps and circuit breakers on all power sockets.

Sometimes an anglepoise lamp is used instead of a permanently wired console light. This is not ideal, but if it must be used, it should either be bolted to the organ console or otherwise have a weighted base and be situated where it cannot readily fall over.

You should know who checks the organ's electrical wiring. It is not unknown for the organ builder to assume the electrician checks it, and for the electrician to assume that the organ builder does.

A general safety guide for electrical appliances is:

- plug in appliances before switching on the power;
- do not touch electrical equipment with wet hands (as the chances of an electric shock are vastly increased);
- keep water and liquids away from electrical appliances, and disconnect power immediately if any liquid is spilled inside;
- check electrical equipment periodically;
- switch off mains before removing plug.

Power points near the floor in buildings used by young children should have safety covers fitted, which should be used. As these covers are easily lost, the church should keep a plentiful supply.

In addition to these electrical hazards, many organ blower housings contain asbestos. This can mean that any work on the housing must comply with the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations.

Organ humidifiers which are not properly maintained can spread Legionnaires disease. There is a code of practice which must be followed to minimise this risk.

Shelves

Choir vestries soon accumulate vast amounts of music and junk. Items can be precariously piled on top of cabinets and can easily fall on top of you.

Avoid unstable piles of music. Find proper homes for all sets of books, even if it means putting some music in storage. Alternatively use some of the choir budget for a new bookcase, if you have room.

Some modern furniture, particularly flat-pack furniture, is not strong enough to carry the full weight of music. Full size sheet music weighs 36 pounds per foot (53 Kg per metre). This means that a four-foot shelf can be required to support more than a hundredweight of paper. Flat-pack furniture shelves need to be braced along their whole length.

Music must be accessible without having to balance on one foot while standing on the piano. Even standing on a chair can be dangerous. A short set of aluminium steps is inexpensive, takes little space and is readily available.

Pianos

Pianos can be dangerous in three ways:

- weight;

- string tension; and
- stability.

A piano weighs from 650 pounds (300 Kg, or a third of a ton) for a small upright, up to 1400 pounds (635 Kg, or two-thirds of a ton) for a model D Steinway Grand. Lifting them requires great care and knowing how to lift properly. There are companies which specialise in moving pianos. Normally you need four men to lift a piano safely, fewer if particularly strong and trained. Even digital pianos can be surprisingly heavy. Don't even think of moving a piano if you have back trouble.

The tension on a piano string is about 165 pounds (75 Kg). As there are over 200 strings, the total tension across a piano frame ranges from 18 tons for a normal upright to 30 tons for a concert grand. If a string snaps it can be like a cheesewire with sufficient force to cut off a man's arm. So do not tempt fate by plucking strings or smashing up an old piano. A broken string should be replaced promptly by a piano technician.

Most of a piano's weight is in the iron frame which holds the strings. In an upright piano, this is at the back making a piano unstable while being moved. Most pianos have special castors for moving. There is a special school piano castor, which must be fitted properly.

On carpets, it is advisable for the piano castors to sit in castor trays. Although a carpet provides enough stability for a castor, it will leave a permanent mark in the carpet.

Light

Rehearse in plenty of light. Churches are full of hazards, made much worse if visibility is poor. Also poor light for singing causes eye strain.

It is a fool's economy to keep lights off to economise. Twenty lights provides plenty of illumination. Even at 10p per unit, this costs less than 20p an hour. Your choir is worth it.

Heating

The organist, and the choir, should be warm when practising. This may require portable heating appliances. The recommended portable heater is convector or fan assisted and fitted with a thermostatic cut-out. If the existing appliance is 'of some age', ie "resting and rusting" in the back of some kind person's garage for 20 years until resurrected and donated to the church, it may be cheaper to replace it with a modern brand than to PAT test it.

The use of LPG (bottled gas) heaters is not recommended. Changing bottles is hazardous to feet when the full bottle is dropped on them, and to backs when changing bottles in the heater. Cassocks can catch fire if the flowing robe is too close to the flame.

It is reasonable to expect the church to be warm for services and choir practices. It is not reasonable to expect the church to be heated for private organ practice, unless this is part of the organist's employment. A traditional stone church has a high thermal capacity where it can take weeks for its mass to warm up in summer and cool down in winter.

An organist may need to practise in a freezing building. The following advice is offered in A Practical Guide to Playing the Organ by Anne Marsden Thomas (published by Middle Eight Music Ltd):

- place a fan heater by the organ (but keep it focused on you, not the pipes or the organ bench);
- find or bring a kettle to provide hot water and/or drinks;
- immerse your hands in hot water for at least five minutes before playing;
- strap one or two hot water bottles to your body with a long scarf;
- play in fingerless gloves;
- bring a second pair of gloves warming underneath the hot water bottles. Periodically pause in your work and put your hands in the hot gloves;
- organise your tasks, so that you avoid wasting time. Thus you can achieve what you need before the cold forces you to stop.

Cold weather affects an organ tuning by making flue pipes go flat by up to a painful quarter-tone. This is to do with the speed that cold air travels through pipes. It does not affect reed pipes in the same way. Cold weather makes pianos go sharp as the metal strings contract. An organist should always leave swell boxes open, and be careful of tuning in cold weather.

Working conditions

Ideal working conditions are:

- lighting at 1500 lux to see music clearly;
- temperature between 15°C and 20°C;
- background noise around 35 decibels ; and
- air movement of about ten metres per second, which can just be felt on the face.

For temperature, the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations SI 1992 require a minimum temperature of 16°C for sedentary work.

A person’s physical output halves for every additional 5°C above 20°, so someone is working at one eighth capacity at 35°C.

The 1992 regulations also require:

- buildings kept clean;
- adequate working space;
- suitable and adequate ventilation and lighting;
- adequate toilets and washing facilities;

- availability of drinking water;
- provision to hang outdoor clothing;
- a seat for each employee in sedentary work;
- eating facilities for employees who eat on the premises;
- protection for non-smokers from smoking (but no requirement to provide facilities for smokers);
- floors, stairs, steps, passageways and gangways to be soundly constructed and properly maintained;
- staircases to have a handrail on any open side;
- openings in floors to be securely fenced;
- dangerous parts of machinery to be securely fenced; and
- vehicles and pedestrians separated as necessary.

Other hazards

An organist shares responsibility with other church officers for ensuring that the church is safe, and should therefore ensure that he does nothing to compromise that safety. This requires an appreciation of general safety checks.

A health and safety inspection of a church should check:

- the floors are sound, level and not slippery;
- carpets and mats are securely fixed;
- availability of fire extinguishers;
- extinguishers have been checked;
- safe electrical and heating systems;
- protection from bells and clock weights;
- secure marking of open graves;
- restrictions on access to dangerous towers and galleries;
- safe access to all public areas;
- provision of first aid;
- toilets are clean;
- no accumulations of junk and debris;
- chairs not stacked too high;
- loose chairs in rows clipped together in four or more;

- cupboards not overfilled;
- no damp kitchen equipment;
- windows properly fastened.

Churches can be required to carry out risk assessments on particular aspects of their work. There are separate health and hygiene regulations for kitchens. The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers has produced its own safety guidance.

All Anglican churches must be inspected by an architect once every five years under Inspection of Churches Measure 1955. Any defects he identifies must be corrected within the timescale stipulated.

The local authority is always pleased to advise in these matters.

Personal Security

In addition to the risks from tangible items, there are other safety factors which need to be considered.

Personal safety

Organists are frequently in the church alone, practising or sorting music. Organists are usually church keyholders. It is good practice to organise activities such as cleaning and flower arranging to ensure a presence in the church most of the time it is open. Sometimes churches organise a rota of church sitters. Any presence is a deterrent. It is also good practice for there to be visits by church officers at random times. Organ practice contributes to church security.

Churches are not immune to theft and vandalism, but attacks on people are much rarer. An organist is not at greater risk in a church than elsewhere. The following good practice can help:

- keep the doors locked at night;
- during the day, only leaves doors unlocked if there are other people in the church;
- have a mobile telephone with you;
- switch on sufficient lights to see the whole building, rather than just the part by the organ console;
- make sure someone knows where you are and when you expect to return;
- keep valuable items locked away;
- always comply with the churchwardens' (or equivalent) instructions about locks and alarms.

Do not see people who come into a church as being a threat. Most casual visitors simply want to admire the architecture or enjoy quiet. This need not stop

your organ practice. Most visitors quite enjoy hearing organ practice even when you are tediously repeating a difficult pedal passage.

If someone starts talking to you about their problems, you may wish to listen, but explain that you are the organist. You should not attempt counselling unless trained. Direct them to the vicarage, or call someone who may be able to help. People rightly seek help from the church, and are entitled to see those able to provide it.

Sometimes church entrances are used by tramps or addicts. It is recommended that such areas are fitted with locked gates and kept illuminated. Such people may seem intimidating but are rarely any physical threat. Avoid dark passageways to get to a side-door. Either insist on using a well-lit main entrance or for side entrances to be adequately lit.

Many organists in empty churches at some point believe they are joined by ghosts through hearing footsteps, voices and similar. Perhaps we are. However it is more likely to be the effect of a church's cavernous acoustics on wind, pigeons and heating pipes. If you are still spooked by this, remember there is no known incident of an organist being attacked by a ghost.

Stress

A different sort of personal issue arises from stress.

Most organists have frantic periods. Stress becomes an issue when the organist cannot cope. Stress is a state of mind rather than a state of play, in that some people can happily cope with a situation which stresses someone else.

Stress derives from the concept of fight or flight. If faced with a physical threat, such as from a dangerous person or a wild animal, the human instinctively prepares either to fight or run away. This instinct involves arching the back, clenching fists and draining blood from the skin and releasing glucose and fat into the bloodstream to produce energy. The same phenomena happen even when the threat is not a physical one. About two-thirds of employees suffer from some form of workplace stress. About half of all stress is caused by colleagues rather than the job itself.

The body can take short periods of stress quite easily. However prolonged stress can lead to personality changes in attitude and behaviour. More serious cases can lead to weight loss, headaches, skin disorder and other symptoms. Eventually stress can lead to a breakdown, for which time off and treatment is necessary.

An employer is obliged to take reasonable precautions to avoid stress. An organist should not be put under unreasonable pressure, nor should an organist expose choir members or others to unreasonable pressure.

An employer can be liable for stress to an employee on the same basis as for any other accident or illness suffered in the workplace. This legal principle was established by the case Walker v Northumberland County Council [1995]. The position was clarified by the case Rorrison v West Lothian College and Lothian Regional Council [2000] which held that an employer is liable for psychiatric injury only to extent that such injury was foreseeable.

This law was further explained by the House of Lords in the leading stress case of Barber v Somerset County Council [2004]. The Lords made the following points:

- an employer becomes liable from when the employer first becomes aware of a problem, such as being told by the employee or receiving a sick note indicating stress as a problem;
- an employer is obliged to investigate complaints of work pressure;
- an employer must provide assistance, at least in the short term, to an employee in difficulties;
- where official guidance is published on the subject, an employer is expected to follow it;
- budgetary constraints and similar pressures on colleagues are no reasons to do nothing;
- an employer must investigate case of stress and depression, particularly when an employee has taken sick leave for that reason;
- even a small reduction in duties and being sympathetic can make a difference.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a reduction in energy which prevents completion of a task. Fatigue is a purely physical condition; there is no such thing as mental fatigue. The sensation is caused by a change in the chemical composition of certain body fluids.

Research done more than 100 years ago has established that:

- fatigue is avoided by performing more tasks. It is better to make 10 trips easily carrying 20 pounds, than 5 trips struggling to carry 40 pounds;
- rest leads to a complete recovery from fatigue;
- a rest period is most effective at the first signs of fatigue;
- there are no long-term consequences of fatigue.

As with stress, the abilities to pace yourself, stay calm and prioritise helps greatly.