The impact of computer display height and desk design on muscle activity during information technology work by young adults

L. Straker a,*, C. Pollock b, R. Burgess-Limerick c, R. Skoss a, J. Coleman a

a School of Physiotherapy, Curtin University of Technology, Perth 6845, Australia
b School of Psychology, Curtin University of Technology, Perth 6845, Australia
c School of Human Movement Studies, University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Australia

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Abstract

Computer display height and desk design are believed to be important workstation features and are included in international standards and guidelines. However, the evidence base for these guidelines is lacking a comparison of neck/shoulder muscle activity during computer and paper tasks and whether forearm support can be provided by desk design. This study measured the spinal and upper limb muscle activity in 36 young adults whilst they worked in different computer display, book and desk conditions. Display height affected spinal muscle activity with paper tasks resulting in greater mean spinal and upper limb muscle activity. A curved desk resulted in increased proximal muscle activity. There was no substantial interaction between display and desk.

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Keywords: Computer; Muscle activity; Musculoskeletal disorder; Work-related neck and upper limb disorder

1. Introduction

During the late 1980s, international and national standards and guidelines on computer use were developed in response to the growing reports of musculoskeletal disorders associated with computer use (e.g. AS, 1990; EEC, 1990; ISO, 1997; SCC, 1991). These standards covered workstation tasks (data and word processing, typing, programming, etc.), environment (space, light, noise, heat, etc.), software (usability, dialogues, etc.), hardware (displays, keyboards, non-keyboard input devices, etc.) and workstation (desk, chair, etc.) design in addition to personnel factors (eyesight, physical problems, mental stress, etc.). Many guidelines included information on how the individual should fit the furniture to themselves (e.g. chair height so the knees are >90°, armrests/keyboards height so elbow angle >90°). Some guidelines provided considerable detail on workstation design such as chair seat height, seat pan depth/width/angle, seat back height/width/length; armrest height/width/length; work surface height, width, depth, leg clearances; keyboard height, placement; and display height/gaze angle, distance, tilt.

These standards and guidelines were based on expert and industry opinion, often using available research evidence. Whilst some standards have been updated more recently (e.g. ANSI, 2002) we believe a serious review of standards is required due to: changes in computing technology, changes in how computers are used, changes in who uses computers, and recent laboratory and field research. Examples of potentially important computer technology changes include: shift from keyboard command to mouse input Graphic User Interface as the norm, increasing replacement of cathode ray tube displays with liquid crystal thin film transistor displays and the development of tablet computers where the user writes on the screen similar to writing on paper and reading from a book. Changes in how computers are used include increasing use for activities of daily living, social communication and entertainment. Changes in who uses computers include
Table 1
Summary of studies investigating effect of visual display height on muscle activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Workstation scenario</th>
<th>Visual target</th>
<th>Reported data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aaras et al. (1997)</td>
<td>n = 20 (workers), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat height unspecified. Desk provided forearm support, height unspecified</td>
<td>Specified; GA-h at +15°, −15°; Tilt 0–5°</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R LES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Babski-Reeves et al. (2000)</td>
<td>n = 8 (students), lab, keyboard. Seat height adjusted for horizontal thigh, vertical leg; backrest upright. Desk height 3 cm below elbow height</td>
<td>Specified; GA-h at 0°, −17.5°, −35°; tilt perpendicular; distance 74, 82, 105 cm</td>
<td>L SPLEN*, L LES†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bauer and Wittig (1998)</td>
<td>n = 8 (students), lab, keyboard. Seat height adjusted for horizontal thigh, vertical leg; backrest upright. Desk height set 3 cm below elbow height</td>
<td>Specified; GA-h at 0°, −17.5°, −35°; tilt perpendicular; distance 74, 82, 105 cm</td>
<td>L CES‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Karlqvist et al. (1999)</td>
<td>n = 20 (workers), lab, mouse/trackball. Seat (45–7.5 cm) and desk height (70–76 cm) self selected</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, R DELT, R EDL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Laursen and Jensen (2000)</td>
<td>n = 17 (young/old), lab, mouse. Seat height unspecified. Desk provided forearm support, height unspecified</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>R DELT, L/R TRAP, R CES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Saito et al. (1997)</td>
<td>n = 10 (workers), lab, keyboard; chair height adjusted ‘appropriately’, desk height 70 cm, keyboard position 4 cm from desk edge</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>R CES‡, R TRAP§, R DELT§, R TES§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sommerich et al. (2001)</td>
<td>n = 16 (eight typists), lab, typing, mousing, reading. Seat pan set for thighs horizontal, legs vertical, feet flat on floor. Keyboard height set at elbow height, distance for vertical forearms and elbows at 90°</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>L/R SCM, L/R LEV, L/R TRAP, L/R CES, L/R TES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Sommerich et al. (2002)</td>
<td>n = 10 (unspecified), lab, mouse, keyboard; chair height adjusted for 90° knee flexion with feet flat, keyboard height at elbow height</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>R TRAP, R PM, R TMI, R DII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Turville et al. (1998)</td>
<td>n = 12 (unspecified), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat height at popliteal height +2 cm, then adjusted for 90° knee flexion. Keyboard height at elbow height</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R CES, L/R TES, L/R SCM, L/R LEV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Straker and Mekhora (2000)</td>
<td>n = 20 (students), lab, keyboard. Seat height at popliteal height, pan inclined 5° forwards. Desk height at seated elbow height</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R CES‡, L/R TES‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Villanueva et al. (1997)</td>
<td>n = 10 (unspecified), lab, mouse. Seat height adjusted so forearm is horizontal when using mouse</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>R CES, R TRAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Villanueva et al. (1998)</td>
<td>n = 10 (unspecified), lab, keyboard; chair adjusted for horizontal forearm when hand over home-key, desk height 70 cm</td>
<td>Specified; distance to desk edge 50 cm</td>
<td>L CES, L TRAP, L DELT, L ECU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued on next page)
the rapid expansion of computer use from specialist computer and data processing occupations to nearly all occupational sectors.

Computer use continues to become more prevalent in both work and home environments. Recent figures from Japan show computers are being used in 93% of businesses and 47% of households (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2005). In 2000, home became the more common site for computer use than work for the first time in Western Australia (33% vs. 25%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Within the adult population, young adults are the most prevalent users. For example, two-thirds of Swedes in the 16–24 years age range use computers daily with 90% using them at least weekly (Statistics Sweden, 2003).

Given the changes in technology and work practices it is timely to review the research evidence for important current workstation features such as display height and forearm support. In a companion paper (Straker et al., 2008) we have reported new data and reviewed prior evidence for the effect of display height and forearm support on posture. In this paper, we review the evidence for the effect of display height and forearm support on muscle activity.

1.1. Display height and muscle activity

We found 14 studies reporting the effect of display height on neck/shoulder surface electromyography (sEMG) for adults. Search strategies included searching Pubmed, Medline and AMed databases using keywords EMG, VDU, computer, display height, and posture, cross-checking reference lists in relevant articles and searches of authors’ library of papers. Table 1 provides a summary of the testing scenario for each of these studies and notes adjustments and estimates we made to provide comparable sEMG data across the studies. In Figs. 1 and 2, we present a summary of the data from these available studies. It was difficult to synthesise the data from the previous studies due to the different manner that data were both collected and reported. For example, normalisation of sEMG data were to a maximum voluntary exertion (MVE) task of holding 2.27 kg weight in each hand with arms abducted 90° in frontal plane and arms parallel to the floor.

Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Workstation scenario</th>
<th>Visual target</th>
<th>Reported data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. Visser et al. (2000)</td>
<td>n = 10 (workers), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat and desk height unspecified</td>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>R TRAP#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

L – left
R – right
DEL – deltoid (assumed anterior)
DEL POS – posterior deltoid
TES – thoracic erector spinae
LES – lumbar erector spinae
SCM – sternocleidomastoid
TRAP – trapezius
CES – cervical erector spinae
LEV – levator scapulae
SPLEN – splenius capitis
EDL – extensor digitorum longus
PM – pectoralis major
TMI – teres minor/infraspinatus
DI1 – first dorsal interosseus
ECU – extensor carpi ulnaris
EMG normalisation details:

The study normalised to a submaximal reference voluntary contraction (RVE) task of resisting neck flexion while wearing mask with 0.91 kg weight attached, looking straight ahead. A correction factor for RVE to MVE was determined by the ratio between CES data at GA = −15° from this study with a mean at the same GA from the literature (Villanueva et al., 1998; Turville et al., 1998; Sommerich et al., 2001).†Normalised to RVE task of holding 2.27 kg weight in each hand with arms abducted 90° in frontal plane and arms parallel to the floor.
‡Normalised to a reference position. A correction factor for RVE to MVE was determined by the ratio between CES data at GA = 0° from this study with a mean at the same GA from the literature (Villanueva et al., 1998; Laursen and Jensen, 2000; Sommerich et al., 2001).§Normalised to RMS of task.
※No normalisation. A correction factor was determined by the ratio between CES data at GA = 0° from this study with a mean at the same GA from the literature (Villanueva et al., 1998; Laursen and Jensen, 2000; Sommerich et al., 2001). The correction factor for TRAP at GA = 0° used data from Villanueva et al. (1998) and Laursen and Jensen (2000).
#Normalised to standard isometric contraction holding 2 kg load, position unspecified.
possible, the cervical erector spinae and upper trapezius data from papers not reported as %MVE by gaze angle (Saito et al., 1997; Bauer and Wittig, 1998; Babski-Reeves et al., 2005) were modified using a ratio of the reported RVE to averaged MVE data at a similar gaze angle from other papers (Villanueva et al., 1997, 1998; Turville et al., 1996; Villanueva et al., 1997, 1998; Turville et al., 1996).
et al., 1998; Laursen and Jensen, 2000; Sommerich et al., 2001) in order to consistently compare relative results across studies.

From Fig. 1, it can be seen that when the visual target is below eye height (negative gaze angles), there is a reasonably consistent relationship with cervical erector spinae (CES semispinalis capitus and splenius capitus) activity increasing with lower gaze angle. There is little data on CES activity for positive gaze angles (ultra-high displays) and large negative gaze angles (very low displays). In contrast, upper trapezius (UT) activity remains fairly constant across moderate gaze angles. Again, however, the available UT data are limited in the low range of display heights, making a comparison with reading from a display on the desk level worthwhile. To aid comparison with postures readers may observe, a ‘neutral’ zone corre-

Table 2
Summary of studies investigating effect of forearm support on muscle activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Workstation scenario</th>
<th>Support type</th>
<th>Reported data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaras et al.</td>
<td>n = 20 (workers), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat height unspecified. Desk height unspecified.</td>
<td>Forearm support provided by desk</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No wrist support: wrist support 1 cm below interspace bar, wrist support 0.5 cm above interspace bar, wrist support and typewriter elevated 3 cm with support 0.5 cm above interspace bar</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R WE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendix and Jesen</td>
<td>n = 12 (secretaries), lab, typing. Seat height 52 cm (45.5–55.5). Desk height (interspace bar) 78.8 cm</td>
<td>Forearm support – provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support – adjustable wrist rest (Rubbermaid 6800) No support</td>
<td>L/R TRAP*, L/R DELT, L/R ECU†, L/R TRAP*, L/R DELT†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1986)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No forearm support with forearms horizontal; horizontal forearm support, fixated to desk; horizontal forearm support, fixated to ceiling</td>
<td>R TRAP*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook et al.</td>
<td>n = 13 (workers), lab, keyboard. Seat height unspecified. Desk height dependent on condition</td>
<td>Forearm support – provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support 20 mm high</td>
<td>R TRAP*, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2004a)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; fixed arm support; spring-loaded arm support; horizontal moveable arm support</td>
<td>R TRAP, L/R EDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook et al.</td>
<td>n = 15 (workers), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat height for feet flat on floor. Desk height so forearms supported with no shoulder elevation/depression</td>
<td>Forearm support provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support 20 mm high</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R EDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2004b)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; fixed arm support; spring-loaded arm support; horizontal moveable arm support</td>
<td>R TRAP, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erdelyi et al.</td>
<td>n = 20 (workers, 12 pain), lab, keyboard. Seat and desk height set to recommendations by Cakir et al. (1980)</td>
<td>Forearm support – provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support 20 mm high</td>
<td>R TRAP*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1988)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; fixed arm support; spring-loaded arm support; horizontal moveable arm support</td>
<td>R TRAP, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng et al.</td>
<td>n = 12 (unspecified), lab, keyboard. Seat height for thigh horizontal, Desk height set to elbow height</td>
<td>Forearm and wrist support provided by ‘Up-line’ tilted 18° from horizontal. Forearm support provided by standard workstation</td>
<td>R TRAP#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1997)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; two arm supports (ERGOarm, ERGOrest); two wrist supports (TOPtec, TC100/210)</td>
<td>R TRAP#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lintula et al.</td>
<td>n = 21 (office workers), field (six week intervention), keyboard, mouse. Seat and desk height unspecified</td>
<td>Forearm support provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support 20 mm high</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R EDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; (1) Ergorest support with mouse pad for preferred hand; (2) Ergorest supports – with mouse pad for preferred hand, basic arm support for non-preferred hand</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R EDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moffet et al.</td>
<td>n = 8 (non-experienced laptop users), lab, keyboard. Seat height 46 cm, backrest 100°, Desk height 73 cm. Laptop used on desk or lap</td>
<td>Laptop 1: built in palm rest with keyboard positioned close to screen; laptop 2: no palm rest with keyboard positioned close to front of base</td>
<td>R CES*, R TRAP*, DELT*, WE*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No forearm support with forearms horizontal; horizontal forearm support, fixated to desk; horizontal forearm support, fixated to ceiling</td>
<td>R TRAP, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tepper et al.</td>
<td>n = 38 (19 healthy, 19 whiplash), lab, keyboard. Seat height for hip and knee at 90°. Desk height set for eye level at 10 cm below upper border of monitor</td>
<td>Forearm and wrist support provided by ‘Up-line’ tilted 18° from horizontal. Forearm support provided by standard workstation</td>
<td>R TRAP, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2003)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; two arm supports (ERGOarm, ERGOrest); two wrist supports (TOPtec, TC100/210)</td>
<td>R TRAP#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visser et al.</td>
<td>n = 10 (workers), lab, keyboard, mouse. Seat and desk height unspecified</td>
<td>Forearm support provided by desk (elbow at 90°) Wrist support 20 mm high</td>
<td>L/R TRAP, L/R EDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td>No support; fixed arm support; spring-loaded arm support; horizontal moveable arm support</td>
<td>R TRAP, R DELT§, R DELT LAT§, ECR§</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
L – left
R – right
DELT – deltoid (assumed anterior)
DELT LAT – lateral deltoid
LES – lumbar erector spinae
TRAP – trapezius
EC - extensor digitorum communis
ECU – extensor carpi ulnaris
ECR – extensor carpi radialis
WE – wrist extensors
EMG normalisation details:
Note: EMG normalised to MVC unless otherwise stated.
*Normalised to standard isometric contraction holding 1 kg load, arms held at 90° abduction in coronal plane, elbows straight, forearm pronated.
†Normalised to standard isometric contraction holding 1 kg load, arms held at 90° flexion, elbows straight.
‡Normalised to standard isometric contraction holding 1 kg load, wrists held in full extension.
¶No normalisation.
§Normalised to standard reference posture seated with hip, knee and elbow at 90° flexion.
‖Normalised to standard reference posture standing with arm in semi-pronated position, performing an isometric contraction against a vertical surface.
#Normalised to standard isometric contraction while holding arms in position of 90° abduction.
||Normalised to standard isometric contraction holding 2 kg load, position unspecified.
sponding to gaze angles between zero and negative 15° is shown.

1.2. Forearm support and muscle activity

We found 10 studies reported in peer reviewed journals which investigated the effect of forearm support on muscle activity. Table 2 provides a summary of the studies including the workstation details, the type of support provided and the muscle activity variables reported. Aaras et al. (1998) and Visser et al. (2000) report decreased UT activity with the provision of forearm support. However, Cook et al. (2004a,b), Erdelyi et al. (1988) and Tepper et al. (2003) found no difference in UT activity with forearm support. Differences in the nature of the supports and the nature of the tasks performed may have contributed to the differing results. To determine whether a curved desk can provide support, which reduces UT load, further research is required.

1.3. Interaction effects of display height and forearm support on muscle activity

Whilst Babski-Reeves et al. (2005) assessed the interaction of display height and chair design, only Aaras et al. (1997) has reported muscle activity data from both display height and forearm support conditions. Although no interaction effects were tested statistically, the figures in their report suggest the reduction in UT activity with
forearm support may be moderated by the display height.

In summary, the available evidence for the effect of display height on upper body muscle activity lacks a comparison with paper based tasks. Similarly, the evidence for the effect of forearm support on muscle activity is inconclusive. Finally, there is no clear evidence on whether display height and desk design features interact. This evidence would help inform workstation design guidelines designed to minimise musculoskeletal disorders associated with information technology tasks. The aim of this study was to assess the independent and interactive effects of display height and forearm support on neck and upper limb muscle activity during work with paper and computer. The results of this study provide complementary evidence to the posture data collected during the study and reported in a companion paper (Straker et al., 2008).

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

The study used a 2 × 3 within subjects design (see Fig. 3). The first factor, display, had three levels: (1) high – top of electronic display set at participant’s eye height, (2) mid – bottom of electronic display set at desk height, (3) low – paper on desk. The second factor, desk, had two levels: (1) ‘traditional’ straight desk set at 3 cm below participant’s elbow height with 0° shoulder flexion and forearms unsupported, and (2) ‘horseshoe’ partly wrapped around curved desk set at 3 cm above elbow height enabling full forearm support.

2.2. Participants

Thirty-six participants (18 male) were recruited by notices in local universities and community newspapers and personal contacts. Participants had a mean age of 20.6 (SD 2.1) years with no history of significant chronic musculoskeletal disorder in the neck and upper limb, no current neck and/or upper limb pain and no history of significant chronic musculoskeletal disorder in the neck and upper limb. The mean height and weight of participants were 179.5 cm (SD 6.9 cm) and 77.2 kg (SD 9.8 kg) respectively. All participants had a mean age of 20.6 (SD 2.1) years with no history of significant chronic musculoskeletal disorder in the neck and upper limb, no current neck and/or upper limb pain and no history of significant chronic musculoskeletal disorder in the neck and upper limb. All participants were using computers at least two times per week for a total of at least 2 h per week, and were right-side dominant for the required tasks.

2.3. Variables

sEMG was collected from bilateral CES, bilateral UT, bilateral thoracic erector spinae/scapula retractors (TES), right anterior deltoid (RAD) and right wrist extensor bundle (RWE). The electrode sites (see Table 3) were prepared by shaving, lightly abrading and cleaning with surgical spirits, before pairs of 12 mm diameter Ag–AgCl disposable surface electrodes (Uni-Patch, Washasha, MN, USA) were placed 25 mm centre-to-centre distance. Impedances were checked after electrode attachment and only values of <5 kΩ were deemed acceptable.

Participants performed three MVEs in a custom-made dynamometer. The dynamometer consisted of a wooden frame and a detachable leather cuff (Lafayette Instruments Co., Lafayette, IN, USA) or plastic handle attached to a 50 kgf strain gauge (Bongsing Co., Korea) via an inextensible wire cable. The strain gauge and sEMG were connected to a desktop PC via an A/D board (National Instruments, Austin, TX, USA) or plastic handle attached to a 50 kgf strain gauge (Bongsing Co., Korea) via an inextensible wire cable. The strain gauge and sEMG were connected to a desktop PC via an A/D board (National Instruments, Austin, TX, USA) allowing the participant biofeedback as they elicited each maximal exertion. The tester gave further, verbal encouragement. sEMG and peak strain readings were recorded for the three contractions and an average of the final two contractions used for normalisation.

Raw sEMG signals were collected via an eight channel AMT-8 EMG cable telemetry system (Bortec Biomedical, Alberta, Canada) with analogue differential amplifiers (frequency response: 10–1000 Hz, common mode rejection ratio: 115 dB). As most of the sEMG signal power was below 500 Hz, data were sampled at 1000 Hz for 120 s in the 2nd and 3rd, 5th and 6th and 9th and 10th minutes, using customised data acquisition software (LabVIEW, National Instruments, Austin, TX, USA). Data were compared over the different epochs, and as no differences were observed, the mean root mean square (RMS) value over the final 2 min of each trial was normalised to the MVE for each muscle.

Motion data were collected in synchrony with sEMG using a seven camera Peak Motus® 3D Optical Capture System (Peak Performance Technologies Inc., Centennial, CO, USA) via a 32 channel A/D interface (Data Translations 3010, Data Translation Inc., Marlboro, MA, USA). Data acquisition was controlled by the Peak Motus® 8 (Peak Performance Technologies Inc., Centennial, CO, USA) software. The method for acquiring kinematic data have been reported in a companion paper (Straker et al., 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electrode placement</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>MVE protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right and left cervical erector spinae</td>
<td>The midpoints between external occipital protuberance and C7. Electrodes placed lateral to the cervical spinal processes on the erector spinae muscle bulk</td>
<td>Head extension against a leather cuff placed around the head over external occipital protuberance and glabella. Participants were seated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right and left upper trapezius</td>
<td>Just lateral to the midpoint between C7 spinous process and acromion</td>
<td>Scapula elevation with straight arms holding a handle. Participants were standing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right and left thoracic scapular retractors</td>
<td>Midpoint between T3 and the inferior angle of the scapular. Electrodes were placed along line between landmarks</td>
<td>Scapula retraction against a handle. Participants supported contralateral knee and hand on a chair to have trunk horizontal during vertical pull by scapula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right anterior deltoid</td>
<td>The midpoints of the fibres of anterior deltoid between the anterior acromion and deltoid insertion</td>
<td>Upper arm flexion against a leather cuff around the distal arm. Participants were seated with the elbow flexed at 90°, trying to punch forward with the arm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right wrist extensors</td>
<td>1/3 distance between the right lateral humeral epicondyle and radial styloid process. Active wrist extension was encouraged to palpate the muscle bulk before placement</td>
<td>Wrist extension vertically holding handle. Participants were seated with forearm supported on a height adjustable table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common ground</td>
<td>Mid clavicle</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the purposes of this study, gaze angle was calculated from the midpoint between markers at the bilateral outer canthi, and the centre of the display, and is reported relative to the sagittal plane with respect to horizontal.

Variability of movement and muscle activity, as well as performance and the psychological experience of flow (Arrowsmith and Pollock, 2001; Webster et al., 1993), were also measured and will be reported separately.

2.4. Procedure

The study was conducted in a climate and lighting controlled motion analysis laboratory. A standard office chair (Burgetec, Perth Western Australia) was adjusted to the participant’s popliteal height. A specially designed desk was adjusted to height and shape (straight/horseshoe). An adjustable height display arm (Swing Arm Single, Atdec Pty Ltd. Padstow, New South Wales) was used to adjust the 15” LCD display (model LM520, AOC, Fremont, CA, USA) so the top of the display was set level at participant eye height, bottom of display at desk height, or turned away from the participant during paper conditions. The same keyboard (model KM-2601, TurboStar, China) and mouse (Optical Wheel Mouse, Microsoft, Redmond, WA, USA) were used in all computer conditions. Six equivalent general knowledge reading and activity sheets were developed and for each participant the six topics were randomly assigned to the six conditions.

Following electrode placement, participants performed MVEs for each muscle using the specially designed rig. Participants then moved to the study workstation and performed the interactive task involving reading and writing on paper or reading from computer display and keyboard and mouse data entry for 10 min. After each task participants moved away from the desk area and returned to the now modified workstation and worked in the next condition for 10 min. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Curtin University.

3. Results

Table 4 shows the muscle activities in the different study conditions. Univariate RANOVA with post hoc contrasts were calculated for each dependent variable using a critical alpha level of 0.01 to balance family-wise error and power (Table 5). Huynh–Feldt epsilon corrections were used if Mauchly’s test indicated lack of sphericity. Covariate analysis using gender had no effect on the pattern of results and so unadjusted results are given. Significant main effects of display and desk were found on neck and upper limb muscle activities.

Compared with the mid display, the high display resulted in 2% less right and left CES activity whilst UT activity was the same. There was no difference in scapula retractor, right anterior deltoid or right wrist extensor activity between high and mid displays.

Compared with the mid display, the book display resulted in 5–7% more CES activity, 3–5% more UT activity, 2–3% more TES activity, 1% more RAD activity and 1% more RWE activity.

The curved desk resulted in CES muscle activity increasing by 4% (right) to 2% (left). Similarly, UT activity was increased whilst using the curved desk by 7% (right) and 4% (left). There was no difference in scapula retractor or right anterior deltoid activity and minimal increase in right wrist extensor activity between desks.

Display × desk interactions were not significant except for a trend for right UT to be less different between display heights with the curved desk.

4. Discussion

These data are the first description of adult head and arm muscle activity during computer and paper IT (information technology) use in the same study, enabling comparison without assumptions related to sEMG technique differences. Our study included data input by keying and mouse use in addition to writing with a pen. The study also included reading from an electronic screen (involving

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Display</th>
<th>Desk</th>
<th>Display × desk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CES</td>
<td>33.1 (0.4)</td>
<td>34.8 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CES</td>
<td>41.5 (0.6)</td>
<td>13.2 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UT</td>
<td>2.0 (0.4)</td>
<td>31.3 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TES</td>
<td>13.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>13.4 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TES</td>
<td>21.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>0.0 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD</td>
<td>6.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.1 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WE</td>
<td>4.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>4.5 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Summary of RANOVA results for neck and upper limb muscle activity variables
mouse use for navigation) and from a book (involving page turning). The results therefore apply to the common office work situation involving both computer and paper IT work. In comparison with other display height studies our sEMG data follow the same trend for increasing CES activity with lower gaze angles and no change in UT activity across different gaze angles. Sommerich et al. (2000) also noted the differential effects on CES and UT. The inclusion of working with books/paper on the desk in the current study extends the evidence to lower gaze angles and suggests no change in the relationships seen over mid to high display heights.

However, means in our data are substantially greater than most prior reports. We believe these differences are likely to be due to differences in amplitude normalisation. As indicated in Table 1, some studies conducted no amplitude normalisation (Saito et al., 1997), some normalised to a reference position (Bauer and Wittig, 1998), and some normalised to a submaximal exertion (Babski-Reeves et al., 2005; Kleine et al., 1999; Straker and Mekhora, 2000; Visser et al., 2000). Some studies conducted normalisation procedures in a functional seated position, whilst others used a supine or prone position (Straker and Mekhora, 2000). Of the studies which normalised to MVE some used manual resistance (Karlqvist et al., 1999; Sommerich et al., 2001; Villanueva et al., 1997, 1998) and others a dynamometer (Aaras et al., 1997; Turville et al., 1998).

Given the variation in past procedures we chose a protocol aimed at a high level of consistency. The protocol involved taking the mean of the best two of three trials where each trial consisted of a one second ramp up, 3 s hold of maximum exertion and one second ramp down. The ramped activity was supported with visual feedback to the participant and verbal encouragement and instruction. The mean RMS over the highest one second period was taken as the MVE value for each trial. This protocol, whilst providing good reliability, would provide a lower MVE value than other protocols using a peak rectified sEMG value. The effect of a lower amplitude MVE value is to increase the task amplitudes. Therefore, our higher task amplitudes may be due to the conservative MVE protocol. The consistency in amplitude in prior research is exaggerated in Figs. 1 and 2 as we needed to use group mean data to provide a comparison reference point for all the studies which did not use MVE normalisation. Gathering data from different studies using different protocols (eg. inter-electrode distance) is problematic. We would not claim that the amplitudes in Figs. 1 and 2 are accurate. However, we believe the figures are useful in showing relative amplitudes and the overall trends in the available evidence.

In our study, the high display condition resulted in surprisingly small reductions in CES (−2%) muscle activity from the mid display condition despite substantial reductions in head (15°) and neck (6°) flexion and gaze angle (23°) (Straker et al., 2008). Fig. 1 shows that prior research has found a similar small reduction. As we have argued, whilst less head flexion has been recommended from simple moment modelling, the load on muscles may be increased with upper cervical extension. Cranio-cervical angle (upper cervical intersegmental angle) increased by 7° in the high display as a result of a greater reduction in head flexion than in neck flexion. Simple modelling of anti-gravity moment suggests CES activity should be more substantially reduced in the high display condition (e.g. Harms-Ringdahl et al., 1986; Snijders et al., 1990; Svensson and Svensson, 2001). In the current study, sEMG has been used to provide estimates of superficial muscle loading, but deep tissue loads are yet to be estimated and these may help explain the failure of simple anti-gravity modelling to account for observed CES sEMG changes. Together with the UT results (no difference to 2% more with high display) these results suggest a high display probably provides no significant advantage to CES and UT.

The book display resulted in a more substantial effect on CES as predicted by a simple anti-gravity model given the increase in head and neck flexion. However, the increased CES activity may have been due to increased stabilisation requirements associated with the increased head and neck asymmetry observed during book/paper use and/or it may have been due to more movement of the neck (and arms) during use of a book/paper. Other studies (Greig et al., 2005) have found a non-linear increase in CES with moderately marked head/neck flexion when reading from a book. Interestingly, the reduction in CES activity reported at extreme flexion by Harms-Ringdahl et al. (1986) was not observed, suggesting participants were not working at end of range and substantially loading passive connective tissue.

Although left UT was consistently higher during book use than mid display computer use, right was only higher in the straight desk condition. This suggests the increased stabilisation required for handling book/pen was not greater than the increased stabilisation used with greater scapula elevation and shoulder abduction when working with a computer at the curved desk. Bendix and Hagberg (1984) had earlier found median UT activity increased with a desk inclined at 22° compared with a flat desk when writing, but not with just reading. This complements our data showing the importance of task rather than display height for UT activity.

The book display also resulted in small increases in scapula retractor, right anterior deltoid and right wrist extensor activity. Assuming a higher load represents higher risk would suggest using paper presents a higher risk. However, paper based tasks may also encourage more variation in posture and muscle activity. Therefore, the higher loads observed may have been due to more dynamic and variable muscle loading which could indicate lower risk. Evaluation of muscle activity variation should therefore be conducted.

The curved desk resulted in a moderate increase in CES activity. The curved desk had resulted in a small (2%) decrease in head flexion (Straker et al., 2008), which would usually be expected to be accompanied by a decrease in CES activity as gross flexion moment would be slightly reduced. However, the small decrease in head flexion resulted in an increase in upper cervical extension (as the neck posture was
unchanged), which may have created an increased CES load. The increase in UT activity with the curved desk was logically associated with an increase in scapula elevation (4–7°) and shoulder abduction (12–17°).

It was anticipated that the increased forearm support provided by the curved desk would result in reduced CES/UT activity as per Aaras et al. (1998). The current results suggest that providing a curved desk does not necessarily provide more support and in fact can lead to increased activity. The desk may have influenced the type of arm support participants chose to use. The previous descriptions of the effect of forearm support and wrist only support have had inconsistent results. Tepper et al. (2003) found a trend for a small increase in UT activity when pain free and neck pain participants worked with elevated full forearm support compared with a floating position. Similarly, Visser et al. (2000) found an increase in UT activity with wrist support, and no real effect of chair arm support. In contrast, Cook et al. (2004a) found a reduction in UT and anterior deltoid activity with forearm support provided by a straight desk (as well as with wrist support provided by a wrist rest) compared to a free floating arm position during keying. However, their other study (Cook et al., 2004b) found no differences between free floating and wrist rest conditions for both keying and mouse use tasks. One possible reason for the conflicting results could be the extent to which participants actually used the support provided and the nature of the support they gained (full forearm support or only wrist support). The different desk designs in the current study differentially encouraged different types of support. Regardless of desk type, participants were able to gain full forearm support for 60% of the time, and some form of support for 82% of the time (data from post hoc analysis of digital video of participants performing in each condition). Full forearm support was achieved 84% of the time using the curved desk but only 36% of the time with the straight desk. However, participants used wrist support for 42% of the time with the straight desk. The curved desk condition was also novel to participants and the elevated scapula, abducted arm and increased CES and UT activity may have been due to participants not being settled in the new set up. Monitoring posture and muscle activity over a number of weeks to participants not being settled in the new set up. Monitor-


Leon Straker earned a Bachelor of Applied Science in Physiotherapy from the Western Australian Institute of Technology, a Master of Science in Ergonomics from University College London and a Ph.D. in the area of Occupational Medicine from the University of Sydney. He is a Professor in the School of Physiotherapy, Curtin University of Technology and is Director of their research and higher degrees by research programs. Prof. Straker’s research interests focus on the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders and include the impact of computer use on children, office ergonomics and participative ergonomics.
Robin Burgess-Limerick received his Ph.D. from the University of Queensland. He is an Associate Professor in Occupational Biomechanics in the School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland, Australia, where he coordinates postgraduate programs in ergonomics. Dr. Burgess-Limerick’s research interests encompass laboratory and field investigations of topics in office ergonomics, participative ergonomics for the prevention of manual tasks related injuries, and reducing injury risks associated with coal mining equipment.

Professor Clare Pollock is the Head of the School of Psychology, Curtin University of technology. She is a graduate of Oxford University (B.A.(Hons) Experimental Psychology) and did her Ph.D. in the Ergonomics Unit, University College London. Since gaining her doctorate she has worked in academia as a teacher and researcher. Her research has focused on the psychological and human factors issues related to safety, complex systems, and technology use. She is a member of Editorial Board for the International Journal of Industrial Ergonomics and was a Member of the Board of the Civil Aviation Safety Authority in her capacity as human factors expert.

Rachel Skoss is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Physiotherapy at Curtin University of Technology. She received her Ph.D. in neuromuscular biomechanics from the University of Western Australia. Her research focus is on the coordination of movement, with particular interest in how best to transfer neuromuscular training exercises into habitual muscle activation strategies.

Jemma Coleman holds a Bachelor of Sports Science from Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. She is currently completing in a Masters in Ergonomics at The University of Queensland and works fulltime at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. Jemma’s research interests include upper quadrant muscle activation with different postures, tasks and rehabilitation regimens.