

Sit-stand advice dubious, "move more" message missing

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High-profile UK guidelines on the amount of time that desk-based workers should spend sitting, standing and moving at work were co-authored by a man who sold sit-stand desks, and appear to make unrealistic recommendations for reducing sitting time, Australian researchers have found.

In a study of newspaper coverage of the quantitative guidance, the researchers also found that many media reports minimised the unique health benefits of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity, and wrongly suggested that different intensity levels across the physical activity spectrum (sedentary, light, moderate and vigorous) are interchangeable – that "one may simply sit less instead of doing regular exercise for health benefits".

The "'move more' part of the 'move more and sit less' message is missing", highlighting an "urgent need for physical activity advocates to reinforce the unique and substantial health benefits of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity", they say.

"Public health experts must promote both messages: adults should first engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity on most days of the week and then limit prolonged sitting time whenever possible."

Led by Dr Josephine Chau of the University of Sydney's School of Public Health, the researchers identified 58 online newspaper articles on the June 2015 release of the UK guidelines, and found that most (76%) didn't mention any of the caveats – provided in a press release – on the limited quality of evidence underpinning the guidelines' recommendations.

Most articles focused on the recommendations for office workers to stand and undertake light activity for at least two hours a day, with the aim of progressing to four hours a day, and for workers to achieve this by using adjustable sit-stand desks or workstations, they found.

The majority of articles didn't report on recommendations to: avoid prolonged static standing because it "may be as harmful as prolonged sitting"; alter postures or walk to alleviate musculoskeletal pain and fatigue; and encourage staff to embrace other healthy behaviours, like cutting down on drinking and eating nutritious food.

According to Chau and her team, the authors of the guidelines initially stated that they were "invited" by UK Government agency Public Health England and a community interest group to produce the document, without disclosing that one of the authors owned a website selling sit-stand work products, that the same man was a director of the community group, or that this group was officially supported by a furniture industry association.

The word "invited" was subsequently omitted from revised versions of the statement.

"These industry connections to companies selling sit-stand desks pose potential conflicts of interest in the commissioning and development of the guidelines and should be fully disclosed *ab initio*," the researchers say.

There were no mentions of any possible conflicts of interest in any of the examined media reports, "probably due to the lack of potential conflicts disclosed in the original consensus statement and associated press release", they say.

Even highly-motivated workers can't reach four-hour goal

Current scientific evidence suggests that adhering to some of the guidelines' recommendations is unlikely to be feasible, Chau and her team say.

Recent intervention trials involving "highly educated and motivated" workers and "activity permissive workstations" found participants reduced sedentary or sitting time by up to 77 minutes per eight-hour shift – well short of the population-wide reduction of two to four hours per shift advised by the guidelines, they say.

"It is possible that the release of this specific guidance about sitting time at work is premature and could lead to confusion and lower engagement in the community as the guidelines change."

Previous studies on the communication of health issues, the researchers warn, show that "inconsistent health advice in the media may lead to public confusion and the perception that scientists are 'always changing their minds'".

"Subsequently, people may mistrust health recommendations and become less inclined to engage in healthy behaviours," they say.

[Overselling Sit-Stand Desks: News Coverage of Workplace Sitting Guidelines](#). Dr Josephine Chau, et al, Australia, *Health Communication*, online first August 2017, Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2017.1359034.

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