

Get a grip

By Lisa Manfield

Optional spring on rebar pliers give workers extra support when they need it.

Lonny Bouchard knows the importance of ergonomics on the job — particularly when the job involves repetitive motion like cutting and tying wire. A foreman in the rebar sector before he was injured and retrained in occupational health and safety, Bouchard is now an industry specialist with WorkSafeBC (the Workers' Compensation Board), focusing on safety solutions for the construction sector. "Rebar is part of WorkSafeBC's High-Risk Focus Strategy and we're looking for ways to reduce injuries," he says.

One of the most common injuries in the rebar sector is sprains and strains caused by the repetitive nature of the work. A rebar worker ties steel reinforcing bars (rebar) at a rate of up to 2,500 ties per day. Most workers use standard pliers equipped with a spring designed to support the hand when fatigue sets in. But the spring can make the pliers more difficult to use, particularly for someone who is just learning the technique, so workers often remove the spring. Once the spring has been taken out, it can't be put back in — and the resulting lack of support may lead to overexertion injuries.

Between 2000 and 2004, injury claims of all types in the rebar sector cost employers 25,225 lost days, with overexertion representing 32 percent of that time. Sprains, strains, and tears accounted for more than

\$3 million in claim costs and represented 55 percent of the claim costs in the sector.

Bouchard began researching ways to reduce injuries in the sector after a stint as a safety coordinator with Harris Rebar, the largest rebar company in Canada with 50 sites in B.C. and more than 300 employees. When he came across an ergonomically designed pair of pliers by Bahco, he brought the potential safety solution to the attention of Ray Malo, the occupational health and safety claims manager at Harris Rebar. Malo recognized the benefits of the pliers' design features and began using the tool in conjunction with the company's safety programs.

The new pliers have struck a chord with the workers at Harris Rebar. Malo originally ordered 10 pairs and has subsequently ordered more than 60 more because foremen and other workers are asking him how they can get a pair. "It's easy," Malo tells them. "Make sure that your weekly inspections and tool box talks are done and at the end of the month I'll give you another pair." Workers suffering from musculoskeletal injuries are also asking him if the pliers will help them. According to Malo, the initiative has been a huge success. **W**

