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# Ergonomics Belongs in the Public Health Curriculum, Not Just the Engineering One

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**Editorial**
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## Editorial

Public health training programs devote substantial curricular time to infectious disease, environmental toxicology, health systems policy, and increasingly to the social determinants of health. What remains largely absent, in our observation across a range of programs, is any sustained treatment of ergonomics as a public health concern, despite musculoskeletal disorders ranking among the leading contributors to years lived with disability in global burden of disease estimates for well over a decade. This editorial makes the case that ergonomics has been miscategorized, institutionally, as an engineering and workplace-safety specialty when its actual disease burden implications place it squarely within public health's remit.

The scale of the mismatch is worth stating plainly. Low back pain alone has consistently ranked among the top causes of disability-adjusted life years worldwide across successive Global Burden of Disease studies, ahead of many conditions that receive far more public health attention and funding. Yet the professional pipeline for addressing this burden runs almost entirely through occupational health and ergonomics programs housed in engineering or kinesiology departments, largely disconnected from the epidemiological and health-systems training that public health students receive. A public health graduate is far more likely to have studied vaccine hesitancy in depth than to have studied the workplace and postural determinants of the single largest disability burden category most of them will encounter in population health data.

**Part of the historical reason for this separation is disciplinary:** ergonomics grew up alongside industrial engineering and occupational medicine, addressing workplace injury through a lens of individual employer liability and workers' compensation systems, rather than through the population-level epidemiological lens that defines public health. That history is understandable, but it has left a structural gap. Musculoskeletal disorders are not confined to formal workplaces; they show up in unpaid caregiving labor, in informal and gig economy work with no occupational health oversight at all, and increasingly in the general population through sedentary behavior and device use patterns that have little to do with traditional occupational exposure. These are population health phenomena, not just workplace safety phenomena, and they deserve epidemiological surveillance and public health policy attention rather than being addressed solely through employer-level occupational health programs that miss most of the population experiencing the burden.

We would encourage schools of public health to integrate at least a foundational module on ergonomic principles, exposure assessment, and musculoskeletal disorder epidemiology into required coursework, not as an elective specialty track but as core content on par with existing modules on chronic disease risk factors. We would similarly encourage public health surveillance systems to extend musculoskeletal disorder tracking beyond the formal workplace injury reporting systems that currently dominate the data, toward broader population-level surveillance that can capture the substantial burden occurring outside traditional employment relationships.

We recognize this is a resourcing argument as much as a curricular one, and public health curricula are already crowded with legitimate competing priorities. Our claim is not that ergonomics deserves unlimited space, but that its current near absence from public health training is disproportionate to its measured contribution to disability burden, and that the discipline's traditional institutional

home in engineering and occupational medicine has, perhaps inadvertently, obscured its relevance to population health as a whole. Closing that gap would better equip the next generation of public health practitioners to address a burden that, unlike many headline-grabbing health threats, has been quietly large and persistent for a very long time.



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