The connection between age, job control and sickness absences among Finnish food workers

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Methods
The relationship between sickness absence and job control among industrial food workers of different ages (n = 114) was studied.

Results
The number of absence spells, particularly short absence spells, was higher among younger workers, as expected. Using multivariate analysis, low job control was associated with an increased number of all absence spells (P < 0.02).

Conclusions
Job control may be an important factor in determining sickness absence among industrial workers.

Key words
Job control; sickness absences.

Introduction
Job control is regarded by Karasek [1] as the worker’s chance to influence his or her duties and strategies during the working day. Vahtera [2,3] evaluated job control among municipal personnel and showed that high job control combined with good work demands lead to commitment to work and fewer sickness absences. Little research has focused on the significance of job control among industrial workers.

The purpose of this study was to see if there was any connection between job control and the number of absence spells among food workers of different ages.

Methods
The study population was composed of full-time food workers (n = 145), who participated in the training programme in a food factory and remained employed for the whole of the year 1995. The study sample consisted of all workers who completed the questionnaire (n = 114, 85 female and 29 male, mean age 40.1 years) at the start. The response rate was 79%. The study sample was divided into two age groups: <40 years (n = 54, 33 women and 21 men, mean age 29.8 years) and ≥40 years (n = 60, 52 women and 8 men, mean age 49.3 years).

Sickness absence data were collected from the company’s records for 1995 (the follow-up period was 1 January–31 December 1995). All sickness absences that began during the follow-up period were included, including those which continued into 1996. Each sick leave certificate was examined and successive sick leaves were regarded as one spell. This study focused on the numbers of all and of short (1–3 days) absence spells. Using the median number of spells (median = 3) as a dividing point, the numbers of all and of short sickness absence spells were divided into two groups: low (0–3) and high (4 or more) numbers of absence spells.

The items of job control index [2] used in the questionnaire were: content of work; independence of work; opportunities for involvement; and clarity of the work role. The values of variables (range 1–5) used in the job control index were summed, which resulted in an index range of 9–45. It was validated in this material and had a Cronbach alpha of 0.76. Job control was divided from the median (median = 24) into two classes: low (9–24) and high (25–49) job control.

The numbers of all and of short sickness absence spells in 1995 were used as dependent variables. Correlation between age and job control and the number of short and
of all sickness absence spells was evaluated using logistic regression analysis, job control being the constant variable in this model. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 9.0 for Windows.

**Results**

In 1995, 87% of the workers had sickness absences. The majority (75%) were short absences; 49% had a high number of all sickness absence spells; and 22% had a high number of short absence spells. Younger workers had more sickness absence, but this was only significant for short spells \( P < 0.04, \text{ odds ratio (OR)} = 3.0, 95\% \text{ confidence interval (CI)} = 1.2–7.6 \).

The percentage of those who rated their job control as low was highest among young women (64%) and lowest among older men (17%). A low job control was also prevalent among older women (57%) and younger men (52%).

Low job control increased the number of all absence spells \( P = 0.02 \). The effect of age did not reach statistical significance, even though young workers had more absence spells than older workers \( \text{OR} = 2.2, 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.9–5.1, P = 0.07 \).

The key factors contributing to sickness absences among industrial food workers were age and job control. Similar results have been obtained in previous studies [2,3].

The number of absence spells, particularly short absence spells, was higher among younger workers, as expected. Job control also seems to be an important factor among industrial workers, since low job control was associated with an increased number of all sickness absence spells.

**References**