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Canadian studies of VDT operators suggest tighter safety regulations

A pair of recent studies of video display terminal operators in Canada suggest that although the machines do not seem to pose a serious threat to an operator's health, the government ought to develop workplace regulations designed to protect employees who work with VDTs.

The most recent study, a five-year effort conducted by Quebec ophthalmologists, suggests use of VDTs can cause severe eye fatigue but no permanent eye damage. The doctors recommended that VDT operators have their eyes checked at least every two years.

In the other study, a Canadian government federal task force formed by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau recommended that employers should take steps to protect VDT operators until official government regulations can be established.

Among the recommendations issued by the task force were that employers should:

- Limit the time an operator spends working with a VDT to five hours per day;
- Pay for initial eye tests for VDT operators and subsequently follow up with annual exams;
- Supply VDT operators with correc-

tive lenses specially adapted to the visual demands of their jobs;

- Accept that pregnant women have the right to be reassigned to other positions without loss of pay, seniority or benefits. (The Ontario Labor Relations Board has ruled that women have such rights.)

The report concluded that fear concerning the potential health effects of VDTs "is real" despite tests which show that radiation emitted by VDTs is well below levels deemed safe by governments. It recommends that governments conduct further research into radiation emissions, the possible cumulative health effects of the emissions upon VDT operators over prolonged periods of time and the possible risks associated with the use of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which are used as insulating fluids in some VDTs.

The task force was established in March with a \$300,000 budget to study the effects of the nation's microtechnology industry and to determine whether changes in Canada's Labor Code were necessary. The five-member group conducted public hearings across Canada over the summer.