

Poor literacy hurting staff

POOR language, literacy and numeracy skills are blamed for thousands of workplace injuries in Victoria each year.

The inability to understand basic instructions and warnings has caused injuries ranging from cuts, burns, broken limbs and amputations to deaths, according to WorkSafe Victoria.

WorkSafe figures show about 30,000 workers make compensation claims each year.

About 5300 Victorian workers, including more than 1500 who were born overseas, were taken to hospitals with serious injuries between last July and February.

Of those born in non-English speaking countries, most were from Italy, India, Greece, China, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

A Skills Australia report released this month found four million Australian workers — mainly in labour-intensive and low-

MARY PAPADAKIS

level service jobs — had poor language, literacy and numeracy skills, with instructions such as hearing protection, isolation and company policies too difficult to understand.

While the exact number of attributable workplace accidents in Victoria is unknown, experts agreed the problem was increasingly putting workers at risk.

WorkSafe Victoria acting executive director of health and safety Stan Krpan said WorkSafe was devoting significant resources to address the issue.

"There is no doubt that workers with limited English skills or literacy are at risk in the workplace if they can't read signs, ask questions or make complaints," he said.

"Sadly, as the figures show, many of those workers who lack English language skills end up in hospital, or worse."