



Occupational Health Society of Australia (WA)

Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee Inquiry into mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements

The Committee comments contain a mixture of matters of concern which affect the resources industry as a whole and matters based on a presumption that workplace mental health is a particular concern for FIFO workers.

The Society believes that workplace mental health is a serious concern for the total mining industry and for a number of other industry sectors continually under pressure to deliver services e.g. health care and social assistance, education and training, police, ambulance and firefighting services.

Many of these concerns will be addressed with the passage of the Work Health and Safety (Resources) Bill being prepared for enactment in either 2015 or 2016, which is to be based on the Work Health and Safety Bill 2014 and on which public comment is currently being sought.

The passage of this legislation, which recognises work-related mental health impacts and requires employers to conduct health monitoring of employees, will assist in the de-stigmatisation of psychological diseases which the Committee have identified as the major barrier to encouraging help-seeking behaviour.

Work Health and Safety Bill 2014

Particular aspects of relevance to workplace mental health:

- Page 1. Title
A Bill to provide for the health, safety and welfare of persons at work or affected by work;
- Page 2. Division 2 – Object 1(a)
protecting workers and other persons against harm to their health, safety and welfare through the elimination or minimisation of risks arising from work
- Page 5. Definition of "health"
Health means physical and psychological health.
- Page 17 Division 2 – 19 Primary Duty of Care
3(g)
that the health of workers and the conditions at the workplace are monitored for the purpose of preventing illness or injury of workers arising from the conduct of the business or undertaking.

The application of these initiatives by the resources sector will be addressed promptly if the past history of occupational health and safety performance is repeated.

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The mental health of FIFO workers versus residential workers.

Is the mental health of FIFO workers different from residential employees employed on mine sites?

A comprehensive health screening was conducted with 591 workers from a gold mine in the Eastern Goldfields with results reported in the Journal of Health, Safety and Environment Vol 26(5) December 2010.¹ One third of the workforce were FIFO employees. The study investigated lifestyle and work-related health risk factors screening for depression, anxiety and stress and alcohol consumption.

The results showed that rates of smoking, diabetes, depression and anxiety were higher than respective national rural and remote state figures. Frequent and high levels of work-related stress and personal stress were significantly associated with harmful drinking, depression, anxiety and stress, even after adjusting for a number of independent variables.

The researchers found that the results suggest that the psycho-social working environment in the WA mining industry was challenging, and may be responsible for the high rates of mental health issues observed in the study.

Table:

Indicators of health status in the study population versus national rural and remote rates

	Rural and remote rate (MC crude) %		Study results %	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Diabetes	3.8	3.4	7.5	6.8
Depression	4.3	6.6	19.3	12.7
Anxiety	3.4	6.0	13.9	7.0
Stress	9.8	11.8	9.3	8.6
Smoking	29.2	23.6	36.9	26.1
Binge drinking	29.9	19.0	16.1	31.0
Obesity	65.8	46.6	75.3	58.5

NB. The final sample consisted of 591 men and women over 18 years of age, with a gender structure of the study population consisting of 90% men and 10% women. On average, workers had been employed for two years.

¹ Journal Health Safety and Environment 2010, 26(5):389-401, Digging for gold and coming up blue: a health survey in the mining industry. Velandar, Schineanu, Liang and Midford (National Drug Research Institute)



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Importantly, what this study shows is that it is likely that all workers in the mining industry are experiencing pressure to meet production targets which can result in negative mental health.

Researchers suggested that, in fact, FIFO workers as a category may well be experiencing less work related and personal stress than residential employees.

Significant differences were identified in health indicators between FIFO workers and locally residing mine workers, particularly in relation to work-related stress.

Reasons for the significant differences included the physical separation from the working environment during days off, higher income compared to resident workers and the provision of accommodation, meals, transport and amenities when on site at no cost to the worker.

The researchers concluded that there is a need for a more comprehensive and pro-active approach to workplace health where all the relevant lifestyle factors that can impact on workplace health are integrated rather than treated as separate entities in order to develop a sustainable, evidence-based model for a healthy workforce.

Conclusion

The Occupational Health Society of Australia (WA) hopes that the Education and Health Standing Committee will be able to facilitate the speedy passage of the Work Health and Safety Bill 2014 and the Work Health and Safety (Resources) Bill and ensure that the regulatory resources required to enforce the provisions are made available.

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