



Beyond the black stump, but not beyond care

Occupational stress and depression in fly in, fly out workers at remote worksites is taking its toll, but how can companies help?
Phillipa Cockran reports.

Managing stress and depression in 'fly in, fly out' (FIFO) workforces at remote sites involves consideration of both the FIFO site, the policy and practices of the employer and the individual employee.

Occupational stress is something everyone lives with, it can challenge us in a positive way which leads to a feeling of satisfaction and productivity or it can be personally disruptive and distressing.

An unsupportive work environment that leaves a person feeling unable to cope can lead to negative feelings and a range of

other consequences, such as physical and mental illness, injury, substance abuse, relationship and job failure.

Mining boom lifts lid on problem

Australian FIFO workers are a workforce phenomenon that has increased exponentially with the mining boom of the past few years. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Western Australia mining industry employs 54,000 people, 45 per cent of whom use FIFO commuting arrangements.

Not all FIFO employees work in remote or isolated communities with many working on sites with access to regional towns and communities with facilities and resources subsidised by the mining industry or the State Government. These mining towns have their own unique problems and challenges, which also include the negative impacts from a FIFO workforce on the permanent residents of the region.

Work and working conditions within the resource industry are extremely varied and FIFO work is not always deserving of the 'bush cancer' or 'golden handcuff' depictions it is given.

However, the stressors associated with FIFO workers who work at remote mining or oil and gas environments are increasingly being associated with sociological and emotional issues which have a negative impact on workers' well-being and productivity.

Isolation can hit hard

The Australian national depression initiative Beyond Blue has claimed that "remote locations and long physically demanding work hours put people who work in these conditions at risk of developing depression and other mental health problems".

Therese Fitzpatrick, Beyond Blue's national workplace programme manager, said "the lack of access to support services in isolated mining centres and

reluctance among men to seek help for health problems could contribute to depression going undiagnosed and remaining untreated.

"Men who are depressed often see it as a personal failing and instead of talking about their problems or seeing a doctor will often try to make themselves feel better by working harder, drinking alcohol or taking drugs, which, in the long run, only makes the situation worse."

These negative impacts are manifested in the form of higher rates of substance abuse, work accidents, absenteeism, disability claims and reduced levels of productivity and retention than the rest of the working population.

Recognising the risks

There has been significant attention accorded to improving physical safety in the workplace and ensuring safe work practice behaviours. But the psychological and social stresses associated with working in remote locations are still to a large extent being swept under the carpet.

Workers in remote locations are faced with a wide range of stressors associated with the unnatural living conditions of the physical and social constraints working for weeks or months at a time, away from family and friends. Sometimes, these workers are living in crowded conditions with little facility or accommodation given to the personalisation of these living spaces. Lack of stimulation is another stressor cited by remote location workers.

The combination of isolation and crowded conditions can be extremely difficult, with many workers living an institutionalised life while on-site. Another negative impact on behaviour is evident with the high incidence of workplace bullying and intimidation that occurs in this industry.

A competitive advantage for the recruitment of resource industry employers could be to provide a healthy

Some of the top stressors affecting remote area workers are:

- Work-life balance
- Under-stimulation
- Safety
- Physical conditions
- Living conditions
- Physical climate
- Organisational structure
- Career prospects and stability
- Physical well-being
- Fatigue

In a paper by K. Goh and mining consultants F. and A. Sibbel some strategies recommended for managing remote site FIFO workforce well-being include:

- Employing 'fitness for work' consultants to assess and develop site policies for site-appropriate fatigue management.
- The availability of adequate communications between the remote location and worker's homes.
- Employer subsidy of workers' personal phone calls home, which could be achieved through the allocation of phone cards.
- Installing mobile phone towers, depending on site constraints.
- Altering the work culture of work beyond shift rosters.
- Ongoing education and training programmes.
- Providing families of workers with information packages about the remote site, and contact information including site and head office phone numbers, company postal address emergency contact details.
- Ensure adequate employee assistance programme (EAP) support for employees.
- Develop on-site peer mentoring and buddy systems.
- Proactively develop and provide opportunities for after-hours social activities.
- Providing alcohol-free areas.
- Provision of double accommodation facilities for those FIFO employees who are couples.
- Travelling time should be logged as company time not personal time, particularly for long flights.
- Home support strategies. There is evidence to support that the welfare of the worker's family has a significant impact on the wellbeing and productivity of the worker.

work-life balance by allowing a more personalised environment, location-appropriate recreational programmes and the use of specialist employment assistance programme (EAP) providers throughout the industry.

Assistance programmes the go

EAPs are employed throughout the world in a range of government agencies and a variety of commercial industries including the maritime and fishing industry, the automotive industry and the resource sector. EAPs are sometimes described as a best practice strategy for managing remote workforce work-life balance issues.

Most EAP services are designed to deliver telephone counselling and web-based counselling with an emphasis on confidentiality. In a largely male-dominated work environment, confidential counselling is an important health care adjunctive to a working demographic who are the least likely to seek help within regular social and employment networks.

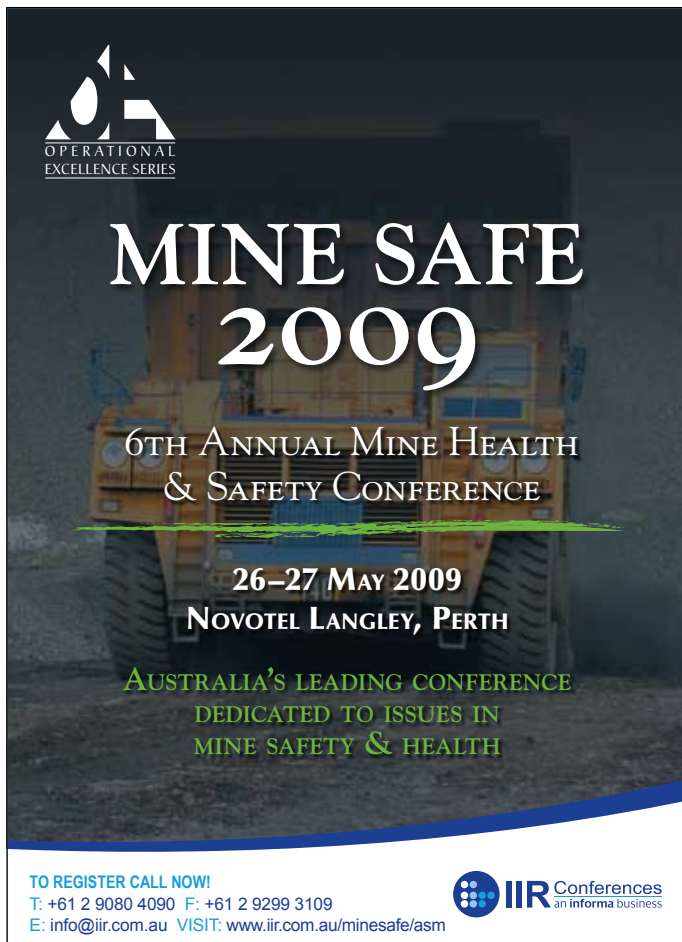
As most of the stressors associated with this industry are associated with work-life balance many EAPs develop programmes which provide counselling on a range of issues including medical, legal, financial, spousal and family counselling. Some provide counselling for the families and partners of workers, to equip them with coping strategies while apart.

An ounce of prevention

The traditional approach of EAPs has been focused on intervention, but there are now programmes being developed which concentrate on preventative strategies for endemic problems associated with the remote location workforce. For several years the Australian resource industry has been carrying out drug and alcohol testing throughout the recruitment phase, after on-site accidents and after low-productivity periods.

This form of testing has been very successful in detecting and reducing the incidence of abuse in the work environment, but the incidence of substance abuse either on duty or on leave is indicative of the failures of the work environment and the resource companies to support or compensate workers for the hardships of working in remote environments.

A WA Department of Health study, *Digging Deep for Better Health*, also recommended that lifestyle training programmes would be of great benefit to remote site workers. These initiatives would include providing wellness programmes and EAP services. ■



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