

## Drugs and alcohol

'read out'

### Here is an example of an incident in WA.

A commercial vehicle driver travelling south from Karratha died when his 16 tonne truck left the road and fell into a dry riverbed. It is believed that the driver may have fallen asleep at the wheel. The driver is understood to have been awake for more than 43-three hours. The forensic pathologist's report found evidence of alcohol and prescription medicine that contained a stimulant. The return journey undertaken by the driver was carried out in the early hours of the morning, when fatigue is most likely to affect a person. There were no flexible scheduling practices that enabled him sufficient non-working time to obtain sleep throughout the journey.

'ask'

### Q. What factors contributed to the incident?

**Possible answers:** *prescription drugs, Lack of sleep; fatigue; loss of concentration; insufficient recovery times between shifts; and lack of information.*

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### Why should there be an alcohol and drugs strategy in the workplace?

Australian businesses are losing more than \$500 million per year due to absenteeism resulting from hangovers or alcohol and drug related injuries. Having an alcohol and other drugs policy in place that sets out clearly how to address safety and health risks arising from people impaired by alcohol and drugs can help reduce the risk to all people involved. Education and information about the ways alcohol and other drugs can affect safety and health should form part of every strategy. It is important that everyone at a workplace understands the effects that alcohol and other drugs may have on their ability to work safely.

### Workplace safety and health is everyone's responsibility

Use of alcohol and other drugs becomes an occupational safety and health issue if a person's ability to exercise judgment, coordination, motor control, concentration and alertness at the workplace is impaired, leading to increased risk of injury or incidents to themselves or others. Co-workers may be placed in difficult situations, expected to cover unsafe work practices or faced with reporting a fellow worker. The focus at our workplace is on occupational safety and health management rather than more general concerns about personal health.

Impairment can be caused by a range of factors, including alcohol and other drug use. Other impairment factors may include fatigue, medical conditions, chemicals, heat, noise and symptoms of work-related stress. It should not be immediately assumed that impairment is caused by alcohol and/or other drug use.

Our employer has a responsibility to ensure that where a worker's capacity to work safely may be impaired, the person is not in a position of personal risk and does not present a hazard or risk to the safety and health of others. Responding to a hazard or risks at the workplace caused by alcohol and/or other drugs may also include situations where clients, customers or visitors enter the workplace or staff visit clients at other venues. Where the conduct or presence of visitors is hazardous at the workplace, 'authorised people' may direct visitors to leave immediately. 'Authorised people' are employers and people who have the management and control of a workplace.

Our personal responsibility for safety and health at the workplace is complementary to the employer's duty and we all need to receive adequate information, instruction, training and supervision to fulfil it. However, we must all take reasonable care of our own safety and health and not endanger the safety and health of others at the workplace. We should present for work and remain, while at work, capable of performing our work duties safely. The consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs while at work is unacceptable, except in relation to responsible use of alcohol at our workplace social functions.

At some workplaces, the hazards associated with alcohol and other drugs may be greater due to the nature of the workplace. Even when people return a zero alcohol or drug level they may still be impaired. 'Hangover' effects can endure beyond the direct presence of the drug and create risks.

The risks at every workplace must be assessed individually. Hazards or hazard factors to consider in relation to increased risks of injury or harm if people are impaired by alcohol and/or other drugs include:

- Operation of machinery;
- Driving in the course of work;
- Situations where concentration or motor coordination is relied on to carry out a job;
- Use of hazardous substances; and
- Performing duties as part of a team.

Risk factors to consider when assessing whether risks exist or may arise from alcohol and other drugs include:

- **Patterns of alcohol and/or other drug consumption** - People who use large amounts on single occasions may create different risks compared to people who are regular heavy users
- **Type of workplace culture** - For example, do we encourage people to drink after work finishes

- **Availability of alcohol and/or other drugs** - At some workplaces, workers are more likely to be exposed to usage, so the risk of them being impaired may increase. In other workplaces, they may be more exposed to the consequences. For example, workers in the hospitality industry may be more at risk of harm from non-workers impaired by alcohol
- **Isolation from family and friends** - Workers in isolated areas or separated from family and friends sometimes report that they are more likely to consume alcohol and/or other drugs due to boredom, loneliness or lack of social activities
- **Inadequate job design and training** - Unrealistic performance targets and deadlines, excessive responsibility, monotonous work or low job satisfaction may, in some instances, be risk factors. Inadequate training, supervision and communication may also contribute to this risk factor;
- **Levels of supervision** - Inadequate supervision and communication about expected roles and behaviour on the job and consequences of unacceptable behaviour may be a risk factor
- **Extended working hours or shift work** - Illicit drugs, such as amphetamines, or prescription medication, may be taken to keep awake
- **Interpersonal factors** - For example, bullying at work may increase risks
- **Working conditions** - Hot or dangerous environments may contribute to alcohol and/or other drug taking

If a risk assessment suggests a level of risk, controls need to be introduced to eliminate or reduce the risks. Except for alcohol testing, a positive drug test is not directly related to impairment nor does it provide a reliable indicator of impairment. It only detects whether somebody has been exposed to drugs. Impairment testing, also known as 'fitness for work' or 'fitness for duty testing systems', measure actual impairment rather than the existence of drugs or drug by-products in the system. Employers in Australia are already using impairment testing as an alternative to, or in conjunction with alcohol and other drug testing at the workplace. As with drug testing, such testing has limits and should be part of a comprehensive strategy at a workplace which includes education, policy and procedures.

'ask'

**Q. Before I finish, is there anything that you can identify that we could be doing better in this workplace to address the issue of drugs and alcohol?**

*Take notes about any suggestions...don't panic if there aren't any takers.*

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for listening to me.

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