

[WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: DION KLEIN]

Healthy resolutions for the year ahead

Occupational health

Since most people spend at least half of their life working, the workplace is a natural setting to educate and promote health and quality of life

THOUGH many organisations aim to reduce injuries and claims, others have yet to develop and deploy strategies that have a significant impact on the overall well-being and quality of life of each employee. By focusing on the health of the employees, which may have an impact on the individual's predisposition to workplace injury or illness, the organisation will indirectly have a positive impact on the overall health of the local community and nation as a whole. Why is this important?

We constantly hear of the increase in health-care costs, the long wait for health-care services, the rise in health-care premiums and the increasing obesity of the population. The future of Australian health sometimes appears dismal at best.

But if organisations act quickly to implement "experiential" health-focused training and education programs, and adopt a culture of promoting corporate health and well-being in the workplace (as the US did successfully in the 1980s), then the Australia health-care system has a chance of surviving and continuing to cater to all.

Since most people spend at least half of their life working, the workplace is a natural setting to educate and promote health and quality of life. A report titled *Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2001-02* (NOHSC, December 2003), points to an incidence rate of 17 claims per 1000 employees for 2001-2. Of those, 69 per cent of the cases were reported by males. Though the number of reported cases dropped over the previous six years, the proportion of claims rose from 28 per cent to 31 per cent.

Additionally, the median work time lost increased from 2.6 weeks in 1996/97 to 3.4 in 2001/02. Direct costs increased per case by 78 per cent. Most new compensation cases occurred in the 40-44 years age group, comprising more than 13 per cent of all cases; those 55 years and over had the highest frequency rate of new cases.

In the *Parliament of Australia (Senate) Annual Report 2001/02*, it was reported that though the injury rate was reduced, the estimated compensation premium rose by \$32,220 from the previous year.

Initiatives focusing on occupational health and safety are highly commendable and have made huge impacts on workplaces. The Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission hosted the 2003 Safety Awards to promote and



Let's get physical: create a culture of health, well-being, and care within the workplace.

recognise those organisations that have achieved continuous improvement in injury prevention. Among the finalists were those that had health and well-being campaigns offering employees massage, lunchtime classes (e.g., yoga, stretching, relaxation, walking, etc), compulsory work breaks, and an increase in a significant investment in employee training and development.

A commitment from senior management in creating and promoting a health-conscious work culture was similar in many of the highlighted case studies.

The commended organisations included the Department of Education, Science and Training, the ACT Chief Minister's Department and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Occupational Health and Safety programs tend to focus on prevention and rehabilitation with many programs having positive productivity, financial and health outcomes. However, many organisations offer temporary "band-aid" approaches versus making a commitment to long-term programs.

Additionally, few organisations are proactive. Many do not consider or listen to the actual needs of each and every employee. For example, ACT employees worry about being overweight (contributed by lack of time to exercise and poor nutrition), they may suffer from neck, shoulder and back pain, and struggle between home and

work-life issues. Many of their complaints can be reduced by in-house exercise programs, good nutritional practices, correct posture when performing job duties, and massage. Including health, fitness and well-being activities in organisations' training and development program and budget is a different approach (compared with the OHS approach).

Employees have an opportunity to be educated in the workplace not only in areas that are related directly to their work, but in important aspects of personal health. This will greatly affect their occupational health which may decrease the number of work-related injuries and compensation claims.

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How's your diary next week?

If you have a day clear of appointments next week, you might like to put it to good use - and extend your skills as a communicator.

Roger Fry & Company has a series of short courses at the National Press Club, and there are some places still available.

The topics are **Understanding the Media** (Monday 8 March am), **Oral Briefing Skills** (Wednesday 10 March all day), **Speech Writing** (Thursday 11 March all day), **Handling the Media** (Friday 12 March all day).

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