



Information Overload

Issue 16, December 2003

Welcome:

The end of another year, it is a time of reflection, of celebrating achievements and planning the projects for the New Year. It is also a time for the traditional work Christmas lunches and evening social gatherings. It is also a good time for us to look at the issues surrounding the provision or not of alcohol to attendees, and the occupational health and safety issues surrounding the provision of alcohol at work, and during work time. We will also be looking at the interesting subject of drug and alcohol testing. Is it an invasion of privacy, or a justified stance on occupational health and safety grounds?

As always, if you would like to see us cover any other topics, we would love to hear from you. Just send an e-mail to training@iea.com.au. We would like to wish all our readers a very merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year. If you think that any of your colleagues would like to receive a copy of this newsletter, please ask them to send an email to training@iea.com.au and we will add them to the list.

We hope you enjoy reading, have a great week, and a safe and happy Christmas and New Year.

In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Drugs and Alcohol
- Developing a Policy
- The Government's Say
- WA Commission Endorses Urine Testing
- Soldiers Under Fire
- A Thought to Ponder

Drugs and Alcohol

Alcohol is the most commonly consumed drug in Australia. Alcohol is a depressant drug that slows brain activity responses and impairs co-ordination.

It is essential that all persons at a workplace are aware that alcohol and other drugs may impact on a person's ability to work safely and the effect this may have on the safety of others at the workplace.

Employees can only take "reasonable care" when they understand the effects of alcohol and other drugs. Employers should provide

'information, instruction and training' about alcohol and other drugs as with any other hazard that occur in the work place.

It is estimated that a quarter of accidents, and 15-20% of fatal accidents, involve employees who are affected by alcohol at the time of the incident* (National Occupational Health & Safety Commission Australia)

Did you know that a person who takes drugs and/or drinks heavily is 10 times more likely to miss work, and have a 33% lower productivity rate than their work colleagues?

The effects of alcohol vary according to:

- gender;
- body size and weight;
- state of health;
- built up tolerance and dependence;
- the amount and strength of alcohol and the way it is consumed;
- food in stomach;

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- environmental and psychological factors; and
- whether alcohol is used with other drugs or substances.

Nearly 1 in 5 employed people have problems related to alcohol, with 1 in 10 consuming it at levels that are likely to affect their health.

Raised blood alcohol level while at work may increase the likelihood of accidents. Alcohol consumption can lead to delayed reaction time, impaired coordination, memory and other cognitive functions and decrease the ability to concentrate and communicate. In some cases alcohol consumption may lead to an increased likelihood of violent or aggressive behaviour.

Regular heavy consumption of alcohol can lead to a range of psychological, social and medical problems, and is associated with poor work performance and attendance. Alcohol dependence is also likely to lead to deterioration of skills and interpersonal difficulties.

Drug use is not just limited to illicit drugs such as cannabis or heroin, did you know that some over the counter medicines (OTC) and prescription medicines can affect mental and physical functioning, and if mixed with alcohol can seriously impair judgement? Whilst OTC medications are readily available, they can sometimes have a serious detrimental effect on your ability to undertake work safely (even if taken within the correct dosage guidelines given). If you are at all unsure about whether you should be taking OTC medicines and/or prescription medications whilst undertaking certain functions at work (driving, operating heavy machinery), then you may wish to speak to a pharmacist or occupational health and safety officer/nurse if one is provided by your organisation.

Developing a Policy

There are a number of reasons why it may be appropriate to develop a workplace policy on alcohol and other drugs.

An employer could be found in breach of the general duty of care to provide a workplace that is safe and free from hazards if injury or harm is suffered as a result of alcohol or other drug use. Having a clearly defined policy with supporting procedures in place will assist the employer to provide a safe workplace and manage drug and alcohol related issues in the workplace.

The existence of a policy also provides a means of informing employees and other people at the workplace about what behaviour is acceptable in relation to alcohol and other drugs.

Having an alcohol and other drug policy also demonstrates management commitment to a safe and healthy workplace.

It may be good practice to have a policy even if alcohol and other drugs do not pose a current risk at a workplace. Things can and do change. However, as with all workplace safety and health policies, including alcohol and other drug policies, are prioritised according to the hazards present and perceived level of risk at your workplace.

A guideline on how to develop a drug and alcohol policy is given by the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection - <http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/PageBin/guidswa0055.htm>

The Government's Say

According to Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott, the issue surrounding Drug and Alcohol testing lies firmly at the feet of the employer and the employee. All relevant Occupational Health and Safety Legislation for instance sits at a State and not Federal level.

The Federal Privacy Commissioner's policies also do not cover Drug and Alcohol testing in the workplace, although this may be reviewed at the end of 2003. At the present time, the only instance where an employee would be covered by the Privacy Act, with regards to Drug and Alcohol testing is during the pre-employment screening process.

And despite a number of unions rather vociferous campaigning against the introduction of drug and alcohol testing in the workplace, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) does not have an official stance on the subject – YET.

WA Commission Endorses Urine Testing

The WA Industrial Relations Commission recently endorsed a construction company's policy for drug testing employees. Pioneer Construction Materials recently introduced a "Fitness for Duty Policy" which mandates that workers must be tested for the presence of drugs using urine testing. The Transport Workers Union took the company to court after 2 members were sacked saying they preferred the less intrusive saliva testing.

However, the Commission found in favour of the company saying that the standard for urine testing was more accurate and reliable than the saliva test.

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Soldiers Under Fire

A recent news article in the Human Resources Magazine cites a case of 47 Australian Army Soldiers who allegedly failed a random drug test. (The case is still to be heard in court). Brigadier Power said that the Army has a zero tolerance policy towards the use of drugs, and said that the soldiers had "put their health, their careers and the safety of their mates in danger by using illicit drugs."

Assistant Defence Minister Mal Brough said that about 10% of the Australian Defence Force would undergo random drug tests in the first year of the screening program.

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A Thought to Ponder:

"Anyway, no drug, not even alcohol, causes the fundamental ills of society. If we're looking for the source of our troubles, we shouldn't test people for drugs, we should test them for stupidity, ignorance, greed and love of power."

P.J. O'Rourke

Your comments and suggestions on the subject of this newsletter are most welcome. Or if you would like to see other issues covered in future editions, please email training@iea.com.au

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