

Solutions sought in fight against fatigue in transport

Human fatigue is now recognised across the industrialised world as being a safety issue of the highest priority leading into the next millennium. We live in a '24 hour society', with many sectors of our economy now working on a 24 hour cycle, seven days per week. There is increasing pressure for people to work longer hours and to use time flexibly.

In conjunction with these structural and cultural changes, technology is forcing us to change the way we work. Systems are becoming more complex as computerisation takes over manual operation. Planes and ships are becoming larger and faster, yet crews are getting smaller. Goods are being transported in larger quantities and tighter deadlines are being demanded.

It is unlikely that human fatigue in the workplace will ever be eliminated. Rather, human fatigue must be effectively managed so that we work within limits that ensure individual and community safety and wellbeing.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts is currently undertaking a wide ranging inquiry into managing fatigue in transport – air, sea, road and rail. Australia is a large landmass with long distances between major centres. We have an extensive air, sea, road and rail transport network and human fatigue in transport is a major issue for employees, employers, government and the general community.

The inquiry has attracted a strong response from individuals, industry organisations, unions and professional associations, Australian and international experts on fatigue management, and government departments and agencies. The overall picture is that while fatigue has been well researched and is widely recognised as being an important safety and economic issue, there is still some way to go to effectively manage it.

Fatigue is more than not getting enough sleep. The critical causes of severe fatigue that have been identified in the evidence received by the committee are:

- the time of day of the work period, with the highest risk of a fatigue related accident being between midnight and 6 am;
- extended hours of work;
- the lack of adequate rest between work periods, the timing of the rest periods and, importantly, the quality of rest obtained; and
- fatigue is cumulative, it adds up over time leading to increased impairment as the 'sleep debt' increases.

A key research finding is that the impairment we suffer from fatigue is similar to the impairment caused by alcohol. Research by the Centre for Sleep Research at the University of Adelaide indicates that the performance impairment following 17 hours of wakefulness is equivalent to the impairment caused by a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.05%. Being awake for 24 hours is equivalent to (BAC) 0.1%. By law we are not allowed to drive a vehicle if we have a

BAC over 0.05%. However, we can legally drive a vehicle after being awake for over 17 hours, which people regularly do following a long shift or overtime.

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In the area of public policy, approaches and initiatives to manage fatigue outlined in the submissions span the continuum from tight prescription of working hours to allowing maximum industry flexibility. In the submissions there are three main themes:

- A need for tight, prescriptive regulation of duty and rest hours.
- That prescriptive approaches do not work and the transport industry should have the freedom and flexibility to develop their own performance based fatigue management programs. A number of Commonwealth regulatory agencies and State and Territory governments are moving away from 'prescriptive legislation' to non prescriptive 'outcome legislation' which will allow operators the freedom to decide how they will achieve safety standards.
- A combination of the above, which envisages a basic prescriptive regulatory framework within which the industry is free to develop performance based fatigue management programs.

In addition, technological solutions to fatigue management are being developed and implemented, including video monitor systems and a computer software package designed to test and structure shifts so as to reduce the potential for fatigue.

The committee has travelled extensively gathering evidence, holding public hearings, round table discussions, private briefings and inspections. To ensure that as wide a range of views as possible is represented the committee has spoken to truck drivers at a truckstop in Guyra, NSW, through to an internationally recognised fatigue management expert from the United States who, amongst other things, contributes to the NASA space program. The committee is cognisant of the fact that although the focus of the inquiry is on transport, fatigue management is an issue for all sectors of the workforce.

This inquiry has generated interest not only in Australia but internationally. Australia is experimenting with a number of innovative approaches to managing fatigue and the eyes of the world are on us. The committee looks forward to being able to make a positive impact, both nationally and internationally, on how fatigue is understood and managed in the future, particularly in transport.

For further information:
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