

## Staff stress costs money



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This column's recent review of 1998 described a stressful year in the workplace. And detailed research conducted for ALIA confirmed this general impression. In a survey of 1600 ALIA members in all states and territories, more than sixty-three per cent of librarians reported increased stress during the past year.

Stress at work is often a controversial issue. It is difficult to define. Its statistics are not easy to interpret. It is highly subjective. Not surprisingly, it is sometimes viewed with scepticism, if not outright scorn. Some have described it as the trendy way to get out of work. Sufferers are at times accused of jumping onto a fashionable malingerers' bandwagon. The president of the Australian Medical Association has commented that as many as seventy per cent of stress claims could be based on 'invented' symptoms. Be that as it may, stress claims are increasing rapidly across all industry sectors. Initially, claims were especially evident in the public sector, but private enterprise has recently been catching up fast.

Tempting though it may be for employers to regard stress-related workplace problems are merely 'the RSI of the 1990s', that view is likely to produce only more and more claims and sharply rising costs. Stress is clearly not merely a staff comfort or contrivance issue. It is also a major cost-reduction opportunity for employers. And any organisation doubting that need only consider a recent Queensland Supreme Court decision which awarded more than \$500 000 in damages to an employee for work-induced psychiatric breakdown.

So what can a prudent employer do to eliminate, or at least minimise, the risk of such catastrophic outcomes? First, they should understand their legal obligations. Health and safety laws in all states and territories impose a duty of care which requires employers to provide a work environment which does not present risks to their employees' health and safety — and this incorporates physical, mental and psychological well-being. They need to take, and be seen to take, necessary steps to remove all foreseeable risk [the duty of care in occupational health and safety was discussed in detail in August 1998's column]. Too few employers realise that their legal obligation extends to risk of stress and damage to psychological well-being.

It is probably fair to say that almost all problems of occupational stress contain a strong personnel management element. As such, they demand managerial rather than medical intervention. Treatment designed to help the employee 'cope' with a problem on its own may actually lock-in the problem for the longer term, because by definition it will not get to grips with the real issues which have created stress. Because individuals are so different, it is critical to identify quickly the perceptions and reactions of employees to particular developments at work.

Basically, stress occurs when, confronted by a demanding environment, employees feel that they do not have the skills, abilities or general capacity to deal with it. External counselling can be very helpful where personal circumstances, rather than workplace issues, are the primary cause of trouble. But people whose problems clearly result from work may quickly become long-term 'medical cases' if they are simply sent off to an external agency. Organisations are likely to write-off the matter as the employee's problem. But potentially heavy costs will not be borne by the employee. If medical evidence implicates the workplace as the source, the employer will almost certainly be liable. This could involve continuing workers' compensation payments until retirement age and damages for negligence.

The discovery that sixty-three per cent of Australian librarians are experiencing severely increased stress at work is accompanied by a finding that sixty per cent are being asked to put in much greater effort at work. It would be a brave commentator who argued there was no connection between the two. More than one in five librarians are working more than eight hours overtime each week, most of it unpaid. And Australians generally are now working between five and ten hours more than was the case just two years ago. This landscape presents as fertile soil for personal crisis, and for flight to stress-driven absences. Compensation and negligence claims follow close behind.

The drive to pressure staff into longer and longer working time, however, seems to be a peculiarly Australian phenomena. Simultaneously, many countries — most notably in Europe, and especially France and Germany — are moving to reduce hours so as to better spread available work. In France, for ex-

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ample, the government is proposing to reduce the working week from thirty-nine to thirty-five hours. There, investigations have already begun to identify companies where staff are consistently working more than the current legal limit of thirty-nine hours. The eventual aim is prevent it happening on a regular basis. Australia seems determined to head in a quite opposite direction.

Here, it would be a supreme irony if, in too-vigorous a pursuit of cost-cutting through staff reductions, employers generated heavy cost increases from legal liability arising from the inability of an overstretched workforce to handle the workloads imposed upon them. In this, as in so many aspects of labour relations, Australian organisations could profitably remind themselves that the efficiency

they seek is most likely to be created by staff who are not overwhelmed by their workload and that efficiency and reasonable working hours are not mutually exclusive. ■

**Note:** Since *Work watch* was written, the Queensland Supreme Court has upheld an appeal in the case referred to. The amount of damages was not, however, the subject of the appeal. The employer's success in overturning the finding of negligence does not, therefore, alter the significance of the initial judgement. It is clear that damages of this order may well result where work-induced stress is found to have caused serious psychiatric illness.

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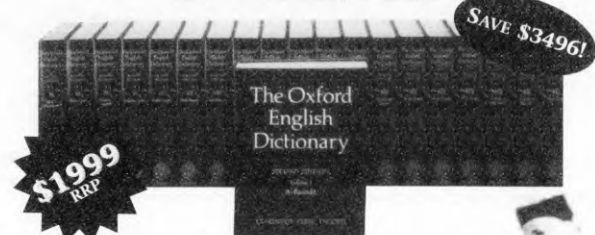
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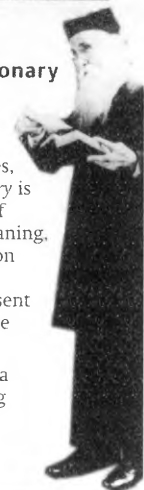
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