

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY

INQUIRY INTO MENTAL ILLNESS IN

FLY-IN, FLY-OUT WORKERS

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CONTRIBUTING FACTORS THAT MAY LEAD TO MENTAL ILLNESS AMONGST FLY-IN, FLY-OUT WORKERS

Introduction: My name is Lyndon Anlezark. I work as a health and lifestyle coordinator in the mining and resources sector. Below is a list of contributing factors that I believe may lead to mental illness amongst Fly-in, Fly-Out Workers. The list is a summary of experiences and observations from a combination of 15 mine sites and accommodation camps in the Northern Territory and Queensland. Some of the headings in this document will also be mentioned by others in your investigation. My main point of difference to the submission is that I can see first hand, out in the field, the mental health challenges of remote work, long rosters and long daily work hours.

THE FOLLOWING HEADINGS HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON FIFO MENTAL HEALTH

1. Compared to the evolution of work safety initiatives, procedures and culture, mental health is where work safety was 25 years ago. Workplace Mental health initiatives are in their infancy.
2. Work Safety Officers and Health Advisors cannot free up enough time (due to paperwork) to properly handle mental health awareness in the workplace.
3. Trusted and approachable Health and Lifestyle Coordinators (HLC) end up as the accommodation site councilor. They are often the sponges that absorb all the stress onsite. It also helps that the HLC position often has a neutral uniform and that people register that a HLC is really there to help with their wellness. This can take a massive toll on HLC or health practitioner's own wellness. More mental health support options are needed onsite.
4. Paramedics have turned away mine site workers who experience family problems when all they wanted was someone to talk to. Other mine site workers have found themselves in the same position.
5. Suicide prevention organizations alone will not be enough to prevent mental illness as suicides have occurred on sites where they have conducted training. Suicides have also occurred at home even though employees have been present at suicide awareness training. These organizations are a great addition to health and wellbeing models within mining companies. All mine site workers will need to be on board with positive mental health awareness initiatives.
6. Rosters: I have noticed worker fatigue and changes in mood in the second week onsite. A 2:1 (2 weeks on 1 week off work) roster is long enough for many mineworkers. A roster from 3:1 onwards is the tipping point. Work safety officers have noticed increased pain killer usage the more days someone is onsite. Even time rosters are the best bet for remote wellness. Companies may need incentives to run with even time rosters. Government may need to legislate to encourage companies onto family and wellness friendly rosters. Even time rosters such as 1:1 and 2:2 are where I have seen the best wellness onsite with regards to home and work life balance and wellbeing.

7. Tenders: When tendering for a *lowest tender wins bid*, longer rosters are more attractive to company's bottom line. If tenders can be cost effective and won using even time rosters this will incentivize companies to submit tenders that are family friendly. Wages for these tenders will not be as high as they would be on the rosters from 3:1 up. Some workers chase the big rosters and big dollars so they always look for the longer rosters (longer than a 2:1).

Note: Some seasoned miners can tolerate longer rosters. How they would react if placed under an extreme pressure event in life while away from home is unknown. I'm not sure if they would handle it any better than someone who is struggling with FIFO mining rosters.

8. Long Roster Traps: Many workers don't realize how tough some of the longer rosters can be. They struggle, get in debt and eventually are trapped by the golden handcuffs.
9. Managers: Many managers are detached from what is really going on, in the corporate sector and in mining. Some managers don't want to know about health problems. This perpetuates the problem and trains the next generation of apprentices to turn a blind eye to mental health problems. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is needed in remote management. Chan and Mallett (2011) state that EI enables the use of soft skills and is the ability to see and understand emotions, their connection for evaluation and formation of strategies to overcome challenges (Chan and Mallett, 2011), (Mayer and Solvey, 1997).
10. Redundancies, sacking and projects ending: These events mount huge amounts of stress and pressure on the employee and the family unit at home. This time period will be known as the death zone. It's usually only a matter of time before you hear of a death after mass sackings, redundancies or the completion of projects.
11. Stigma and Culture: I see the tactic of denial used a lot so people don't have to acknowledge that mental health is a problem that needs to be dealt with. The, *don't mention or talk about it* mentality only continues the problem. *If you are not looking for it you will never see it.*
12. Men: It is common knowledge that the majority of suicide victims are male. I find that they are least likely to raise it as a subject, which perpetuates the problem. However if prompted many are usually open to talking about it and stories of just how many people know of someone that have passed away always surprise me. Continued education in the area of mental health is needed. Talking about it is a good starting point.
13. Suicide recording flawed? I'm not sure if the following is correct or not? I have heard that suicides at home on R&R are not recorded as mining suicides and that in the first 12 months after taking out life insurance policies if there is a suicide no money is paid out. Many miners suggest that this is why so many car accidents involve men driving into trees. Fatigue is blamed instead of suicide, as there was no note. If this hasn't been chased up by the inquiry I recommend doing so for clarity on the matter to move forward with accurate reporting.

14. Reducing stress: Taking people out of camp, is one of the best ways to reduce the stress of cooped up workers. Other activities like exercise is recommended, however only a small part of the mining workforce exercise. Many feel pressurized in remote camps.
15. The only way to have most miners doing something to activate physical and mental wellness onsite is to make it compulsory. Voluntary wellness doesn't work (see obesity health stats).
16. Motivating miners regarding wellness is one of the hardest challenges onsite. If you don't do this the majority will do nothing other than sit, drink, maybe smoke and watch TV for 28 straight days. Everyone knows this is not a healthy lifestyle.
17. Pecking Order: If you really want positive health change in the mining sector, increased respect and organizational structure ranking needs to be given to health professionals. The right for mine workers to freely have a go at health professionals, chefs, kitchen staff, cleaners and camp managers, also needs to change. This again falls in the lap of managers.
18. Alcohol: Many miners drink their allowable 4 beers a night or 112 cans in 28 days. It needs to be noted that this is over the recommended two standard drinks a day. Some drink more than 2 cartons in their week off putting their yearly total at 1664+ cans of beer. Some of the guys I met have consumed 4 cartons on their week break for a total of 2144+ beers a year. Note that on their 4 weeks annual leave more than the usual 4 cans of beer per day are consumed resulting in some of these figures being conservative. I won't go into detail on how much trouble alcohol causes. Many workers lose their jobs due to alcohol related behavior. Interestingly I have heard of a large mine site in W.A that has banned alcohol. The inquiry might want to chase this up to find out why.
19. Drugs: There is denial about the drug problem in mining and the corporate sector. I hear about synthetic drugs being used that can't be detected. Peptides, the ones now famous because of the AFL and NRL scandals are alleged to be used in mining and city based gyms. Stories of drug use while on break always surface. The worry is that someone on drugs might be operating a 600-ton Crain, driving a dump truck or a bus, which could end up harming more people. Pre workout gym stimulants are prevalent. People use them to get through night shift. Others put them in a blender with alcohol (when on break) and head out into pubs and clubs all charged up. I have heard that one of the gym pre workout drinks is now banned because of the link between it aggression and fighting onsite.
20. Suicide education: Suicide education is limited at most mines however it is needed. There are some good organizations out there, which may help part of the current problem but not all. There has been much more talk online about suicide and men's health initiatives which has been good to see over the last few years.

21. The Internet: The *toughen up princess* attitude prevails on mining related Internet sites, which keeps the mental health problem below the surface. Anyone that pops their head up with a wellness idea, feedback or complaint gets assassinated online which continues to fuel the problem by suppressing helpful ideas and supportive momentum.
22. Workforce demographics: Remember mining isn't the army; we don't have the elite of the population who have been screened mentally and physically as thoroughly as the army does. We have everyday people out in remote locations, doing long rosters and long hours of work. We don't have the most communicative (generally speaking) group of people with regards to talking about their feelings. We also have a mix of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Y. These are significant challenges to overcome when promoting mental health.
23. Ownership of health: Mines own people 24 hours a day when onsite. They are responsible for wellness of employees in some way, shape or form. There is also a responsibility on the employee to look after their health as well. It's a fine line. Health professionals need to be involved in all health planning and decision-making, not just accountants and managers.
24. Managers and wellness: Hardly any managers know anything about wellness yet some feel the right to order around wellness staff whenever they want to. At times this includes the provision of drinking nights such as bingo and trivia. HLC's feel forced to do these events to keep their job, when what the sector really needs is the Health Professionals running the program and the employees motivated to participate by their teams, bosses and upper management in the form of directives linked to vision and mission statements.
25. Class system: A class system at times exists between camp staff (service providers) and contractors, as well as sub-contractors and major contractors often known as the client. Many are treated like servants and have to put up with rude behavior. If this rude behavior is directed towards person on a bad day it fuels anxiety, depression or suicide. Class systems are usually easily identified by the color of the uniform.
26. Psychological Testing: Psychological testing could be used to screen workers out before entering mining, like the army does where a room full of hopeful army reservists will be dwindled down to two maybes before basic training screens even more out. For the longer rosters this may end up being compulsory. If you don't want to complete this testing I suggest a very good panel of character judges at the very least. Especially in construction and civil sectors. Many workers in this sector lie and make up fake resumes. Diligent reference checking is needed.
27. Management Accountability: Managers of teams and crews need to be made 100% accountable by their upper management, right up to the CEO making sure mission and vision statements are adhered to out in the remote sites. Small things lead to big things in remote work hubs, especially when long rosters and long days are combined. Managers should be equally accountable regarding mental health. Willful ignorance is no excuse for managers to duck and weave away from their responsibility to provide a safe and healthy working environment physically and mentally for staff. The hiring of emotionally intelligent bosses will be critical for future success in mental health and business.

28. Excuses: Comments such as “*it could be the home life that causes mental health problems*” can be looked at another way. The problem at home may not have eventuated if the employee was at home each night after work. When on a 28-day shift the problem may fester for that entire duration, growing way out of proportion. The company can’t take all the blame for life problems, however long rosters do have a significant negative impact on relationships.
29. Divorce Rate: I believe the divorce rate of miners is much higher than in everyday life. In some areas I estimate 80% are divorced with many I have met being divorced twice. Yet in the same site some marriages still exist after 20 years. In summary it is unavoidable to see that the divorce and relationship breakdown rate is very high in mining. This places massive amounts of stress on the mine site worker who is away from their support network. If there are any bullying or financial worries at the same time while onsite it could result in depression and suicide. The divorce rate can be linked to the roster duration.
30. Extreme behavior: Due to cabin fever type symptoms extreme behavior can be triggered. Part of this trigger in my opinion is the isolation, fenced in type of feeling at work and in camp. Longer rosters in the above scenario will trigger this behavior in some miners. People are complex; many deal with stress in different ways. Having more stress reduction options onsite is a good idea. Many workers need stress reduction yet won’t voluntarily commit to it.
31. The campsite: Counsellors are definitely needed onsite, especially on the bigger sites. When camps number around 300+ people plus in total I notice more mental health problems. Big rosters, even more remote locations will trigger more problems and the feelings of isolation. This will come down to a cost factor. Remember that 20 years ago work safety was said to cost too much for companies to afford. Government incentives could be used to assist companies with wellness programs or the contract may stipulate mental health support is compulsory on particular sites and locations.
32. Help a phone call away: Having the option to call counsellors doesn’t always work for people in distress in camp. A phone number on the wall is not a 100% foolproof solution, however it does help and professional support is always appreciated.
33. Health Decision Making: Health professionals including health and lifestyle coordinators need to make the health decisions onsite and at upper management level. It’s a dangerous game to leave 100% of the decision-making to unqualified and non-health motivated individuals. Decisions may end up costing lives without even knowing it. For example when deciding on what constitutes a health program. Generally speaking, the current model is not good enough.

34. Remote Communication: Good communication availability should be a minimum standard such as phone signal and Internet signal. The company should supply this before building the camp or planning the work destination. Without it people disconnect from life and family.
35. Golden Handcuffs: The term golden handcuff's is used to describe people trapped in the mining cycle for the money as they have huge debts and can't leave. If there is one thing many people that enter mining learn it's that money doesn't solve all problems. In fact many people create much more stress in their lives by purchasing houses, cars, boats, bikes and jet skis. I agree with companies, responsibility has to be on the employee here to control their lives. At times this is hard if you are only home one week out of five, especially if you have nobody else supporting you at home. As I write this submission I have just heard of a miner out of work for 9 months. He lost his farm and relationship. He now lives in a caravan struggling to buy food. Another guy signed up for a \$900 000 mortgage in the boom and cant make the repayments. Something has to crack. I pray it's not their resilience.

Future Research: This issues it not simple, it is quite complex and there aren't many people really passionate about helping the area of mental and physical health in remote locations. From what I have seen in the field and from what I know about the human body, I believe future research will show that longer rosters will result in more anxiety, depression and suicides. I believe that health professionals working with wellness minded companies could develop ever-evolving strategies to assist mental and physical health in remote work while still making profit and providing jobs for Australian families.

I wish you, your workmates and company all the best in the future to provide jobs for the nation and families with dreams while retaining mental and physical wellbeing.

Regards,

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