



SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO MENTAL ILLNESS IN FLY-IN, FLY-OUT WORKERS

SUBMITTED BY: Julie Loveny and Sue Crock, This FIFO Life

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Julie Loveny and Sue Crock are mental health professionals, experienced social workers and the coordinators of This FIFO Life, a mental health online resource developed for FIFO workers and their families with funding from the WA Mental Health Commission and launched by the Hon Helen Morton, Minister for Mental Health on 12th September, 2014. (www.thisfifolife.com)



Sue Crock

Julie Loveny

Julie and Sue have considerable experience in mental health generally and FIFO mental health in particular.

Julie currently provides trauma and counselling support across WA and specialises in the resource sector. She is an accredited Beyond Blue mental health in the workplace trainer. Sue is employed at the Mental Health Commission in the area of suicide prevention.

During the consultation for This FIFO Life Sue and Julie spoke to hundreds of FIFO workers and their family members, as well as managers, supervisors and other staff on mining and resource sites in the Goldfields and Pilbara.

This submission is based on experience and feedback from the hundreds of FIFO workers and their family members consulted for This FIFO Life.

DEDICATION

Rhys Connor, a FIFO contractor was interviewed for This FIFO Life.

Tragically, Rhys took his life in July, 2013, aged 25.

Since then, Rhys' parents, Anita and Peter Miller have lobbied to raise awareness of mental health issues in the resource sector.

Their son's death is a tragic reminder to us all of the urgency in addressing the mental health needs of the FIFO community.

This FIFO Life is dedicated to Rhys.



Summary of research into the mental health of FIFO workers and their families

According to research published in February 2014 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, '*Fly-in fly-out workforce practices in Australia: The effects on children and family relationships*' by Veronica Meredith, Penelope Rush and Elly Robinson there is limited and contradictory research regarding the FIFO lifestyle and the impact on mental health and well being. This was a comprehensive literature review of all relevant studies. It is therefore unclear as to the extent of heightened mental health issues and the incidence of suicide compared with the population generally.

The Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental health (ACRRMH) have conducted lifestyle and well-being surveys across a number of FIFO sites and according to CEO Dr Jennifer Bowers the incidence of psychological distress is higher than the national average.

However the prevalence of mental health issues in the general population is high anyway. Nearly half of our population will experience a mental health issue in their life time, one in five will do so in any year and depression will soon be the biggest health issue world wide and national suicide rates are higher than deaths on the road.

These statistics require everybody to take responsibility for addressing mental health issues. Blaming of resource companies or inferring that 'FIFO' is the problem is in our view, unhelpful. Many people we have spoken to do make FIFO work well and enjoy the many benefits of the lifestyle.

While there is a need for further research into the impact of FIFO, it is as important to implement strategies that promote mentally healthy workplaces. There is an urgent need for employers to be proactive in supporting the mental health and well being of their employees and introduce suicide prevention initiatives. It is critical for **all** employers and employees, not just the resource sector to understand their occupational, health and safety responsibilities around mental health.

The unique challenges of FIFO, which may increase risk factors for mental health issues will best be addressed by close collaboration between the resource sector, industry bodies and government.

THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS THAT MAY LEAD TO MENTAL ILLNESS AND SUICIDE AMONGST FIFO WORKERS	
FACTORS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>Awareness and understanding of mental health amongst the FIFO population and across the resource sector generally is low. For example, Lifeline’s research identified this as an issue and from consultations on sites, men are frequently unaware of the ingredients for good mental health or the signs and symptoms of poor mental health.</p> <p>Stigma and fear of mental illness resulting in workers’ reluctance to disclosing they have a problem because of the serious consequences of doing so. These include being identified as a risk, being viewed as a malingerer and being stigmatised, being removed from the site and even losing their job. This is both a perceived and real fear. Some workers reported their job being terminated once they identified they had a mental health issue, one of which was as a result of a trauma experienced in the workplace. This is a particularly prevalent view in the construction industry where job security is more tenuous.</p> <p>Such practices maintain and reinforce a ‘toughen up’ attitude that is counter-productive, increasing workers’ stress levels, job insecurity and fear of being perceived as ‘weak’.</p>	<p>A sector-wide education campaign to promote mental health, educate about mental illness and suicide and address the associated fear and stigma. Financial and in kind support by the resource sector for initiatives such as This FIFO Life.</p> <p>Information and training that focuses on the importance of seeking help, recovery and prevention of mental health issues is provided across the sector. This is particularly significant in male-dominated industries such as the resource sector and the cultural and traditional constructs of masculinity need challenging.</p> <p>Stigma reduction targeted at the resource sector that is evidence-based, increases early help seeking behaviour and challenges the ‘toughen up’ attitude that is prevalent. Sharing personal stories of FIFO workers who have lived experience of mental illness are a powerful, effective way to reduce stigma.</p>
<p>A lack of sector-wide, demonstrated commitment to recognize the importance of mental health issues and a risk averse culture in the sector that combine to maintain an environment where stigma and fear about mental health are perpetuated.</p>	<p>Leadership is provided by the resource sector and the Chamber of Minerals and Energy in collaboration with relevant government bodies to identify minimum standards and best practice guidelines for mentally healthy workplaces that can be adapted to suit the specific needs of the resource sector.</p>

<p>Managers, supervisors, health and safety and human resource staff have responsibility for managing mental health in the workplace. It is essential they are well trained, able to respond appropriately and manage risks relating to mental health.</p>	<p>Appropriate mental health awareness and suicide prevention training for managers, supervisors and human resource staff is implemented as a priority in the sector.</p>
<p>The WA Occupational Safety and Health Act (1984) requires employers to provide safe work places, free from hazards and identifies workplace stress and bullying and harassment but does not address mental health more broadly.</p> <p>Lack of understanding of the duty of care responsibilities of employees and employers under the (OSH) Act relating to mental health. This is in stark contrast to the high level of awareness of responsibilities for physical health in the sector.</p>	<p>Review of the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Act (1984) in order to strengthen its emphasis on mental health.</p> <p>Training and awareness for resource sector employers and employees in duty of care responsibilities under the OHS Act specifically relating to mental health.</p> <p>.</p>
<p>Existing mental health programs are generic and not targeted to the resource sector.</p> <p>For example, programs such as Beyond Blue’s mental health national workplace program do not use case examples related to the resource sector and uses complex concepts and acronyms that are not relevant for many employed in the resource sector.</p> <p>The provision of mental health awareness initiatives, support services and training is largely unregulated particularly in the private sector. Resource companies have stated they do not know for example who are credible consultants or businesses.</p>	<p>Targeted and appropriate training programs in mental health awareness are identified and developed for the sector. Eg. the existing program is the <i>Minds in Mines</i> program developed by the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health.</p> <p>Criteria or benchmarks established to ensure the credibility of organisations and individuals providing mental health information, training and services, for example for profit businesses and private consultants should have mentally healthy workplaces, risk management policies, trained or qualified mental health personnel etc.</p>
<p>Absence of clear, integrated programs, strategies and workplace mental health plans.</p>	<p>Strategies to develop and support workplace mental health plans including training and education, community capacity building and place making on sites, and suicide prevention training.</p>

<p>Limited awareness of the unique challenges of FIFO and its risk factors amongst new FIFO workers and their families.</p>	<p>Tailored and targeted recruitment and induction programs that highlight the challenges of FIFO and promote strategies to address these.</p>
<p>Poor understanding of the impact of mental health issues on workers and the potential risks for companies.</p>	<p>An assessment across the sector to ascertain the potential risks of workplaces that lack mental health plans, strategies and policies.</p>
<p>Limited understanding of the impact of poor mental health on productivity through lower retention rates, absenteeism and presenteeism.</p>	<p>Identification and distribution of research available on the impact of mental health on productivity. For example, the PWC Final Report <i>Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace</i> March 2014.</p>
<p>The dominance of a 'macho' culture despite the increasing numbers of women and people from diverse cultures working in the sector A lack of training and education of managers, supervisors and other decision-makers in mental health and suicide prevention contributing to the 'toughen up' attitude and culture.</p>	<p>Workplace mental health plans and education and training to raise awareness of mental health need to address the negative impact of a 'macho' culture and its effect on mental health.</p>
<p>A heavy reliance on Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to support workers, limited uptake of this service and few alternative approaches to supporting mental health in resource sector workplaces. Costing of EAP services is based on a low uptake and an average of 2 to 3 sessions</p>	<p>A review of the effectiveness of EAP that considers the reasons for its poor uptake and identifies how improvements could be made and alternative, best practice workplace mental health support services identified, trialled and evaluated, for example peer support programmes.</p>
<p>Limited access to phone and internet on some remote sites that exacerbates the isolation and loneliness experienced by many workers. Regular contact with family and friends is vital to maintaining good mental health. Contacting help lines in a crisis can be difficult or impossible.</p>	<p>Urgent attention is given to installing and maintaining reliable phone and internet connections on all WA Sites as a mental health and suicide prevention measure.</p>

<p>Long rosters and short breaks in the sector, especially in the construction industry place workers under stress and increase fatigue management risks.</p> <p>Contractor companies that support the mining industry typically employ workers on a four week on and one week off roster. With time spent travelling for long distance commuting interstate and even overseas, this often leaves only 5 days at home.</p> <p>Long rosters are not acceptable to most mining companies, yet in order to be competitive in the market contractor companies are required to have their workers on this roster. Contractor camps, often situated adjacent to mining camps, are inferior and reinforce the distinction between conditions under which different workers are employed.</p> <p>Travel following completion rosters is done in workers' own time and can significantly reduce their time with family. Workers commonly reported driving long distances after their flight and after having completed a full days' work.</p> <p>Other work conditions that contractors tolerate in order to meet deadlines, e.g. heat and dust levels that would be unacceptable to mining companies.</p>	<p>WorkSafe reviews the competitive tendering process that results in long rosters and associated risks, in particular the fatigue-management and risks to the duty of care legal responsibilities under the OSH Act.</p> <p>WorkSafe reviews the practice of long rosters and makes recommendations for safe, family friendly rosters that support FIFO workers' mental health and do not add to the stress of the work pattern.</p> <p>Accommodation and other workplace conditions are reviewed to address the distinction between contract workers and those employed in mining and resource companies where conditions are considerably better.</p> <p>Minimum standards across the resource and contracting sector are identified. Resource companies contracting other companies should ensure they meet criteria such as family friendly rosters, critical incident policies, mental health awareness and suicide prevention training.</p>
<p>Limited recognition that FIFO partners and families experience unique challenges from the FIFO work pattern that can compromise mental health. For example, the lack of emotional and practical support, loneliness and isolation and difficulties transitioning between co-parenting to solo parenting.</p>	<p>Family friendly rosters and practices are supported and promoted.</p> <p>Family members are included in communication and site visits to help improve their understanding of their FIFO partner's work and to feel they are part of a team rather than isolated from the work place.</p> <p>Family Liaison Officer positions are established in companies to support families when there are difficulties.</p>

<p>From our experience of trauma support and dealing with critical incidents such as a suicide on site, many staff including managers are ill-equipped to deal with the emotional impact and to manage the risks such incidents pose.</p> <p>A lack of appropriate whole of workforce response to critical incidents including serious injury, death and suicide increases concern amongst workers and discourages disclosures of mental health problems earlier.</p>	<p>Training and education about trauma and its impact is a requirement for all managers and supervisors and clear procedures for managing critical incidents to minimise risks to other workers are established as a matter of priority.</p> <p>WorkSafe staff are trained in trauma and critical incident management in order to advise on best practice to industry and the resource sector</p>
<p>Apart from the wet mess, there are limited opportunities for workers to connect with each other and for a sense of community to develop on camps that would foster mental health and lower the risk of suicide.</p>	<p>Opportunities for workers to connect socially with each other apart from at the wet mess. Eg. Comfortable rooms for watching movies/TV together or for music, book club, video games; benches and seating outside in small clusters, opening the dry mess for coffee, tea and snacks at any time and laid out in a more cafe style to encourage social connection and an alternative to the wet mess, introducing employee initiated groups such as mediation or bringing outside organisations such as the Stargazer Club to view night skies etc.</p>

Recognition of mental health initiatives in the resource sector

Mental health is beginning to be acknowledged as a critical issue for the resource sector and initiatives being undertaken to support mental health deserve recognition. Some examples include:

- The Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia (CME), the peak resources sector representative body in Western Australia, 2014 Safety and Health Conference that included a presentation on mental health.
- Rio Tinto's introduction of a peer support program, its Memorandum of Understanding with the WA Mental Health Commission and its innovative cultural development project, Five in partnership with DADAA (Disadvantage in the Arts, Disability in the Arts)
- Fortescue Metals Group's onsite chaplaincy program.
- ESS's partnership with Beyond Blue to raise awareness of mental health on camps and sites they manage.

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