



Dr Graham Gibson Jacobs MLA  
Chairman  
Education and Health Standing Committee  
Parliament House  
Perth WA 6000

28 January 2015

**Names:** Professor Herbert Biggs, Professor Keith Hampson

**Organisation:** Sustainable Built Environment National Research Centre, Curtin University

**Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee**

**Inquiry into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers**

**Response to Report No.4, November 2014**

Dear Dr Jacobs

Thank you for your letter of 8 December 2014 inviting our response to the Report No.4 "Shining a light on FIFO Mental Health: A Discussion Paper" which was tabled in the WA Legislative Assembly on 27 November 2014.

We wish to thank the Committee for its invitation to prepare a submission and to comment on the discussion points. We further thank the Committee for its analysis of the 70 written submissions and 12 hearings, and its provision in the Discussion Paper of an insightful, holistic and integrated approach to understanding the challenges associated with ensuring a mentally healthy FIFO workforce.

Given that FIFO activity is predominantly a workforce and workplace concern, the understanding and explication of industry initiatives for managing and protecting employee wellbeing is vital. The Committee notes in Chapter 5 a range of programs and facilities outlined in the seven resource company submissions. The Committee rightly notes that quality outcome information on employee access to and uptake of the various program and services described is less than adequate. The present evaluative data is limited, diffuse, and lacks comprehensiveness. We would support an ongoing set of scientifically-focused program evaluations to assess the efficacy of such programs and services to obtain the best possible understanding of which programs and services are supporting better mental health outcomes and which are not.

In this regard, the Committee notes that almost all submitters to the enquiry were in agreement that there was insufficient research on the question of the overall mental health of the FIFO workforce with one submitter (CCI) stating that the lack of empirical data is limiting policy developments and appropriate employer response to properly identify and act on occupation-related health or psychological issues. We would support this view and further acknowledge that industry needs to collaborate with research groups to conduct meaningful research and draw conclusions on the effective management of this unique workforce. We would additionally note that our own planned research, as outlined in our submission No. 20 to the Committee, is a contemporary initiative by our collaborative industry, government and research institute to progress this current lack of empirical data.

Notwithstanding our overall support for thematic and strategic research and evaluation, a number of urgent and applied investigations are warranted to improve the mental health and well-being of FIFO workers. Some examples include:

- Potential investigation into finding an optimal roster design that will better work for industry and FIFO workers. Surveys suggest even-time roster designs are best for maximising satisfaction, with qualitative data and anecdotal evidence suggesting longer-compression rosters (i.e. 4:1) are influencing well-being. *Can we find a balance between employee satisfaction and optimising productivity/cost for the employer?*
- Issues surrounding technology and ability to effectively communicate with families after the shift has completed while working in remote/rural locations. Common feedback themes include not enough bandwidth/technology to support workers trying to contact friends and family – causing internet ‘crashes’. These issues can be heightened when the company is smaller and does not even have the resources for workers to contact home. *Could this be solved by industry allocating specific times for groups of people to contact home after shift, instead of everyone “trying to call home at once”?*
- Consult with employers and employees on the practice of “motelling”. *Could methods of improving camp life be explored to find a practical approach in managing accommodation that can still improve feelings of connectedness and stability while working away?*
- Attrition rates and turnover rates are particularly high for the FIFO workforce. *What attempts have been made by industry to provide realistic job previews to intending employees and their families to minimise inappropriate recruitment?*
- There is a lack of hard data to support an anecdotal view that accidents and near misses are more prevalent at the start and at the completion of rosters. *Is this a realistic view? If it is, what job redesign could occur to minimise employee risk?*

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper.

Please feel free to contact Professor Herbert Biggs or Professor Keith Hampson for additional information or further discussions if required.

---

Yours sincerely



**Herbert Biggs PhD**  
**Principal Research Fellow and Project Leader**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**Curtin University**  
GPO Box U1987  
Perth WA 6845  
Ph.: 0401 680 913  
Fax: 08/9266 3818  
Email: [Herbert.Biggs@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Herbert.Biggs@curtin.edu.au)



**Keith Hampson PhD**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**SBEnc**  
**Curtin University**  
GPO Box U1987  
Perth WA 6845  
Ph.: 08/9266 2126  
Fax: 08/9266 3818  
Email: [k.hampson@sbenrc.com.au](mailto:k.hampson@sbenrc.com.au)

