

Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative

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Abstract

Compared with the Australian population, Queensland transport and storage workers in particularly drivers have a higher rate of chronic disease associated with their occupational environment, unhealthy nutritional intake, a sedentary lifestyle, smoking habits, and excessive weight gain. Poor health can threaten the livelihood of workers and lead to increased workplace health and safety related costs for the employer. Addressing worker health can produce many benefits for employers including increased productivity, improved safety performance, and better staff retention. Broadening successful workplace health and safety management systems to include the promotion of worker health should be seen as a priority in order to achieve these positive outcomes. The Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative aims to provide practical guidance, tools and resources to assist transport organisations to improve and maintain the health of workers.

Introduction

Population ageing and increasing prevalence of chronic disease have affected the productivity of Australia's workforce. The Healthy Workers Initiative, part of the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health (NPAPH), prioritises workplaces as an important setting for interventions to reduce the prevalence of risk factors associated with the development of chronic disease [1].

Workers in blue collar occupations, especially drivers in the transport and storage industry have been identified as being at higher risk of developing chronic disease compared with non-blue collar occupations. A range of workplace factors influence the health of drivers including work design, industry wage structures, and a fit for work focus. Educating drivers on positive health behaviours and the link between chronic disease and lifestyle factors will contribute to individual behaviour change of workers within this industry. Supporting transport and storage workplaces to create a policy, physical and social work environment that promotes worker wellbeing will facilitate and support the health of workers and associated behavioural changes [1].

In addition to targeting workplaces to improve worker health, the national harmonisation of workplace health and safety laws provides further support for an increased focus on healthy worker initiatives. Under the new laws the definition of the term 'health' has been broadened to cover both physical and psychological health [2].

It is recognised that illness and injury can arise from both work related and personal factors. The distinction between work and non-work related illness and disease is becoming less clear. Regardless of the causes, the impacts of worker illness and injury can be seen in an organisation's performance such as decreased productivity and increased absenteeism.

Managing the risks to the health and wellbeing of workers is a responsibility that should be shared between workers and employers.

Traditionally workplace health and safety and worker health have been managed separately in the workplace. Neglecting to address both areas in an integrated way is a missed opportunity for workplaces to optimise health and safety performance by addressing the illnesses and health risks that arise both from work and outside work. An integrated model includes broadening the scope of workplace health and safety responsibilities to include worker health. This approach uses the workplace setting to involve both workers and management collaboratively to change the environment to one that promotes health. The integration of worker health with existing workplace health and safety systems ensures the processes for identifying needs, assessing risks and implementing control strategies is consistent across both disciplines. This will ensure safe and healthy systems of work reach all workers and contribute to achieving a safe and healthy culture in the transport and storage industry [3].

This paper provides the rationale for targeting workplaces in the Queensland transport and storage industry, with a focus on drivers. The need for action is based on the current health of workers within the industry and the impact this has on safety and business performance. The case for addressing worker health, and the tools and resources to assist workplaces to address worker health are available through the *Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative*.

The current health of workers within the Queensland transport and storage industry

National and international health studies indicate that the transport and storage industry tends to be a high- risk industry in terms of health. Compared with other industries the Queensland transport and storage industry has a higher prevalence of health risk behaviours leading to chronic disease. The health behaviours leading to chronic disease in Queensland transport workers include smoking (28.5%), physical inactivity (79.8%), overweight or obesity (82.5%), inadequate fruit and vegetable intake (57.3%), and reported unhealthy alcohol consumption (31.2%) [4].

The focus on drivers within the Queensland transport and storage industry

The transport and storage industry in Queensland employs 5.5% of all people employed in the state [5]. Drivers comprise of the largest percentage of occupations in the transport and storage industry (38%) [6]. These drivers include truck drivers, automobile drivers, bus and coach drivers, train drivers, and courier, postal and delivery drivers [6]. Australian and international medical studies indicate that transport drivers have higher incidence of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, lung cancer, strokes, sleep apnoea, diabetes, and some of these high risk behaviours are also associated with the risk of work related injury or illness [7,8,9,10].

There are a number of industry factors that contribute to the poor health of workers employed as drivers [7,11]. Not only do the sedentary work environment and job conditions (e.g. long working hours) of transport work make healthy lifestyle choices more difficult, but little has been done to create innovative solutions to address transport workers' health challenges [11,12]. The resulting poor health of drivers within the transport industry impacts on safety and business performance.

The impact of transport worker health on safety and business performance

The poor health of workers is a cost to employers through absenteeism and a decrease in productivity. A study from 2005 looking at the health of Australia's workforce found that [13]:

- On average, 6.5 working days of productivity are lost per employee annually as a result of presenteeism.
- The four main causes of presenteeism are: unhealthy lifestyles; workers with illnesses going to work; allergies and asthma; poor work-life balance and high levels of job related stress.
- The healthiest Australian employees are almost three times more productive than their unhealthy colleagues.
- Workers who were unhealthy took 18 days annual sick leave compared with 2 days for healthy workers.

Other studies have shown:

- There is an association between good physical condition and having no chronic diseases and lower injury rates. [3,10].
- Personal health risk factors associated with sustaining injury include: psychological illness, obesity, sleep deprivation, poorly controlled diabetes, smoking, alcohol consumption, and impairment by prescription medications [14,15,16,17].
- Workplace injury and disease contribute to workers compensation costs and indirect costs of productivity loss, absenteeism, mistrust of management interventions and declined market competitiveness [14,17,18,19,20,21].

The ageing workforce and the increasing rates of chronic diseases in the transport and storage industry makes retention one of the biggest issues facing transport and storage businesses with the cost to replace a worker estimated to be up to 150% of their salary [22]. Within 20 years nearly half of the Queensland transport and storage industry workers will be 65 years of age or older, and would be expected to retire or reduce working hours [23]. Losing these workers will result in loss of skills, knowledge, and increased costs to business. Failing to maintain the required workforce size could limit supply chain efficiency, impacting negatively on many sectors of the economy and raising the cost of transport. Reduced experience and pressure on too few drivers could also have safety implications [5, 24].

Building the case for addressing worker health in the transport and storage industry

The impact of poor worker health on safety and business performance, and recruitment and retention in the transport industry highlights the need for transport workplaces to focus on improving and maintaining the health of workers. Workplaces are increasingly being targeted as places that contribute positively towards health, recognising that workers' health could be contributing to business safety performance and workplace culture [25]. Indeed, employers are being made aware of responsibilities in not only occupational safety but also the more general health and wellbeing of employees. Under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*, both PCBU's (Person Conducting Business or Undertaking) and workers are responsible for ensuring health and safety in the workplace [2]. Consultation between managers and workers is required to manage the risks to their health and wellbeing associated with work design or the workplace environment.

Health promotion is defined as enabling people to have control over and improve their health and wellbeing. A healthy workplace is one where workers and managers collaborate to continually improve the health, safety and wellbeing of all workers, and by doing this sustain the viability and productivity of the business [25].

The benefits of a healthy workplace for transport and storage workers and employers include: reduced work related injuries and illness, increased productivity, decreased absenteeism, reduced staff turnover, lower workers compensation costs, improved corporate image, enhanced employee-employer relations, and higher staff moral [26]. Additionally Australian research has shown that for every dollar invested in a workplace health promotion initiative there can be a return on investment between three and six dollars [26, 27]. With the poor health of the transport industry, employers could reduce workers compensation costs, reduce absenteeism and increase productivity by investing in worker health.

Workplace environment can impact health

A range of workplace factors can influence worker health particularly for drivers [28]. Within the transport industry these work related factors are largely centred around: work design (i.e. the structure of the work), industry wage structures, and the traditionally strong industry emphasis on being ‘fit for work’ rather than a more holistic attention on worker health and wellbeing.

Work design:

Three factors associated with customary approaches to work design in the transport industry are perceived to make healthy lifestyle choices difficult for workers. These are:

- The nature of the “workplace”: For transport drivers, they do not have a “workplace”, as such or their “workplace” is their vehicle. This is often thought of as the “lone worker” problem [11].
- The nature of the work: transport work (especially driving) is largely sedentary, with only brief periods of physical activity (for e.g. during loading and unloading).
- The time constraints workers operate under: time pressures and tight deadlines are a common feature within the industry.

The seemingly inflexible structure of the work in turn leads to particular (or a lack of) opportunities for workers to access healthy lifestyle options such as:

- A nutritious/healthy diet. For road transport drivers, stopping or pulling up a vehicle is not always easy. The most accessible places to do so are at designated truck stops, where healthy food choices are generally limited. Unhealthy options are also easier to eat on the go, as may be necessary when working to tight time deadlines.
- Regular exercise. Workers argue that there is very little time available for physical activity outside of work [29]. Regulation of driving hours for drivers range from 12-14 hours per day. Time pressures also mean workers can be required to start very early and finish very late and may perform a large amount of overtime (the work is also shift-work to begin with) [30].
- Good hygiene. For road transport drivers, truck stops are not always well-equipped with showers and facilities necessary to maintain good hygiene practices. This can influence other health practices, such as diet and nutrition for road transport drivers.
- Sufficient rest. Sleepiness while driving may be precipitated by long working hours, driving during periods of circadian misalignment (night work), or by poor sleeping

environments, such as the truck cab. Obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) may also contribute to sleepiness through exposure to sleep fragmentation and hypoxemia by repeated airway closure [31].

- Regular consultations with health professionals. The long hours of transport work are perceived to provide employees with only infrequent or very limited access to health care professionals [23,27].

Industry wage structures:

Payment rates and methods within the industry may mitigate against a work-life balance and healthy lifestyle:

- 64% of drivers in the transport industry have a performance-based wage structure [31].
- The prevalence of performance-based and casual employment places particular pressures on workers, most notably time pressures for jobs, and a reluctance to take leave for holidays, sickness or carer duties. This in turn affects driver fatigue and exhaustion, the need to take (prescription) drugs in order stay alert, lack of early identification and treatment of disease, and an absence of a general work-life balance.

Fit for work focus:

In the past there has been a strong industry emphasis on being ‘fit for work’ rather than a more holistic attention on employee health and wellbeing. Whilst there has been a particular focus on compulsory health and fitness checks for drivers relating to licensing requirements, there has been little monitoring available for workers to evaluate general health and wellbeing to address high risk behaviours and health issues.

Integrating worker health within workplace health and safety

Current workplace health and safety systems share similar goals to health promotion on worker health, so it makes sense to integrate them. Some of the goals may include [22,32,33]:

- Supporting workers to be healthy and safe
- Reducing illness and injury
- Retaining valuable skills of workers
- Enhancing productivity
- Strengthening business outcomes

Each transport workplace will have different health risks and different workplace risks that impact safety, costs and culture in that workplace. The best approach to integrating worker health and workplace safety is through a risk management process that considers how the work environment can either support or impair a worker in making healthy lifestyle choices. This risk management approach integrates health and wellbeing of workers into existing workplace health and safety management systems by identifying the hazards (e.g. work environment and personal health behaviours), assessing the level of risk in the work environment that is causing harm to the health and wellbeing of workers, implementing control strategies to address the work environment and personal health risks of workers and reviewing the effectiveness of the control strategies.

An example of the influence of the work environment on health can be seen in the prevalence of sleep apnoea in workers employed as drivers. The development of sleep apnoea in drivers

leads to a significant personal and public safety risk. Common risk factors for sleep apnoea include obesity and physical inactivity. Sedentary work, long working hours, limited food options and irregular schedules contribute to this underlying risk factor.

Sleep apnoea can be treated by modifying diet and physical activity. In order to manage the significant personal and public safety risk associated with sleep apnoea, workers need to be supported to improve and maintain good health. Workplaces can assist by assessing how the work environment can be modified to encourage healthy eating and physical activity. Any initiatives would need to be tailored to the long work hours, unpredictable schedules and the mobility of drivers [34].

Consultation with workers is a key component throughout the risk management process. The views and experience of the workers will be an important source of information in understanding how the work environment might influence the health and wellbeing of workers. They will also be able to provide input to the most effective types of strategies that can be implemented to control the identified risk. Effective consultation promotes a sense of ownership of the process by workers and can lead to enhanced participation and engagement [25,27].

Support from senior management is also required throughout the process to ensure there is commitment to controlling any identified risks. Management commitment can be demonstrated by investing adequate resources in achieving better health and wellbeing outcomes for workers and ensuring any changes to the workplace environment are adhered to at all levels of the organisation [23,27].

Examples of current workplace wellness initiatives in the transport and storage industry

Some of the initiatives that have been conducted include:

- Anti- and quit-smoking campaigns to help to reduce the high incidence of smoking among employees
- Subsidised private health care to encourage workers to look after their health
- Supplying healthy choice meals to drivers
- Supplying fridges in trucks for drivers to store healthy foods
- Health seminars and health messages incorporated in tool box talks
- Providing information to workers on the location of food outlets supplying healthy food options along major transport routes
- Paid health days to participate in a workplace wellness program
- Subsidised gym memberships
- Truck stop initiatives:
 - Food outlets providing healthy choices and denoting items that are lower in fat and sodium
 - Providing exercise and shower facilities
 - Advertisement of medical facilities near truck stops
 - Health checks with drivers receiving tips on exercise and healthy eating.

Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative

In consultation with industry, the Queensland Government has developed the Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative as its implementation strategy under the Healthy Workers Initiative. The Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative will assist Queensland

workplaces, including the transport and storage industry, to implement initiatives to support the health of their workers [1].

The focus on the transport and storage industry under the *Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative* is being led by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ). With a focus on workers employed as drivers, WHSQ will encourage and support transport and storage workplaces to comprehensively address workplace wellness, thereby sustaining the capacity of workers to make healthy lifestyle choices and to address worker chronic disease lifestyle risk factors.

Under the *Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative* there are a number of support tools and resources available for all workplaces, including transport and storage workplaces, to use to develop their own workplace initiatives. These support tools and resources include:

- Webportal: an online central support interface for workplaces to access evidence-based workplace wellness, information, tools and resources targeting employers
- Workplaces for Wellness kit: a step-by-step guide providing a range of information to assist workplaces to create effective workplace initiatives
- Recognition scheme: a formal online mechanism for workplaces to seek bronze, silver or gold recognition for their efforts to reduce chronic disease lifestyle risk factors
- Funding scheme- seed and matched funding schemes to help support workplaces to implement comprehensive wellness initiatives
- Get Healthy Information and Coaching service- telephone and web based information and coaching services supporting adults to health lifestyle changes
- Workplace Quit Smoking- smoking cessation program including nicotine replacement therapy delivered through Quitline

WHSQ is coordinating a range of initiatives intended to specifically engage Queensland transport and storage workplaces. This includes a professional development course to build on the skills and capacity of employers to implement wellness initiatives, financial and advisory support, and action research interventions to identify initiatives that work well within transport workplaces.

Conclusion

The poor health of workers, particularly drivers, in the transport and storage industry impacts on business performance and viability. Absenteeism, reduced productivity, increased injury rates and vehicle crashes due to medical causes (e.g. obstructive sleep apnoeas, heart disease) are a cost to both the individual and the employer. Workers' personal health can be an important control factor in lowering the risk of work related injury or illness. Some of these health risk factors in the transport industry include: smoking, physical inactivity, poor nutrition, risky alcohol consumption and overweight and obesity. Implementing worker health strategies that focus on improving these health risks will lead to increased productivity and better workplace health and safety performance. There are a range of workplace factors in the transport industry that influence worker health for drivers including work design, industry wage structures, and fit for work focus. Making changes to these factors through workplace health promotion can act to support the health and wellbeing of workers. Worker health strategies can be simple to implement by utilising the Queensland Workplaces for Wellness Initiative tools and resources and by integrating worker health in workplace health and safety systems through a risk management process.

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