

NZ MINERALS FORUM: Mine managers, experts talk worker health and drugs

Bernie Napp - Wed, 29 May 2019

Mine managers, an academic and a WorkSafe specialist shared a stage at the NZ Minerals Forum for a free and frank discussion of worker health at mines and quarries.



Facilitated by MinEx CEO Wayne Scott, the headline topic of interest was the long-standing one of drugs, and also prescription medication.

Other topics included medical assessments, ageing workforce, shift work, bullying and harassment.

Panellists were: Paul Feaver, manager of Bathurst Resources' Canterbury coal mine; Eamon Moynihan, manager of New Zealand Coal and Carbon's Echo mine; Charlie Gawith, underground manager at OceanaGold; David McBride, associate professor of occupational and environmental medicine at University of Otago; and WorkSafe principal specialist Philippa Gibson.

With the increasing reporting of drug use among workers, Bathurst Resources had started using swab tests for drugs, based on Australian practice, Feaver said.

People may tell you they had too much to drink the previous night, he said, but if it's cannabis, the distinction must be made between someone who can be managed back into work, and a habitual drug user.

Moynihan said if a worker fails a swab test, it's instant removal from site for a discussion. If use is habitual, "that's something to look at, no return".

If drug use is intermittent, even so, if workers fail a swab test and then a urine sample, "if it's their genuine way of life, we have to let them go". The company then moves them towards medical help.

Gawith said cannabis decriminalisation legislation would make no difference to OceanaGold. "We don't allow it."

At OceanaGold, if a worker "makes a mistake" they can self report. If they don't, and present with a positive urine sample, "that's it, pretty much".

Worker health is a serious issue in New Zealand, Scott said in opening the session; 600-900 people die each year as a result of work-related illness.

Gibson noted that 50 per cent of worker health-related deaths in New Zealand stemmed from occupational cancers, 30 per cent from respiratory causes, and more of the remainder, cardio-vascular diseases and conditions.

Medication issues

Feaver noted issues with prescription medication, more particularly among older workers, which is not always conducive to using heavy equipment.

"That leads to a debate about what medication you can or cannot use, and this also comes up in drug testing."

He noted heart problems among some workers in the 40-60 bracket, as well as diabetes, particularly when poorly managed, the implication being these people cannot do without medication.

Gawith said a lot of prescription medicine "has the opportunity to impair; they take it when under the weather, but it can make them more hazardous at work".

"We ask our workforce to declare what they are on. If they are not capable of driving a truck, they can do something else."

Medical assessments

Feaver said at Canterbury Coal the cost of medical assessments can reach \$700-1,000 per person, with around 50 staff to consider, and there can be follow-up work, incurring further costs.

"It's got quite expensive, and you need to think about budgeting it."

The benefit is closer attention to workers' health, and more reliable and fit workers. The counterfactual is the potential of risk to other workers, e.g. from truck versus truck collisions on site.

Moynihan said his practice was a baseline assessment for workers, followed by annual assessments, with flexibility for individual workers; some need more attention than others.

Ageing workforce

McBride said the ageing workforce contributes to worker health risk.

"People in mining will have to work longer, and there will be an increased risk of exposure," including from vibration of machinery, and physical stress on hands, knees and back.

His answer is to get exposure to health hazards as low as practicable.

Moynihan said of the ageing population at Echo, "It's referred to as dad's army. Sometimes you do have to look after them. They are there every day, and they work."

His solution is to make sure the mechanical side of things is functioning well, and providing operators good quality machines.

Long-term shift work

Gawith noted the risks of fatigue and to mental health from night shift work. One solution was to provide sleeping mats for people to use at work, if needed.

He said the mine operated with five shifts, of 12 hours, staggered through the day. Some workers preferred to work the same shift every day.

“The production has been fantastic,” with arrangements for workers to have regular weekends off and time with family and friends.

Gibson offered an alternative view: shift work is known to contribute to cancer risk, and in women is linked to heightened risk of breast cancer, possibly, to do with changes of melatonin in the body.

Good nutrition is one approach to reducing risk, she said, as is forward rotational shift work, that is, to start the shift one hour later each day.

McBride’s view was that the risks in this space are to do with stress, and not enough sleep.

Bullying and harassment

Scott introduced the topic as a delicate area today, in which “people can take offence at almost anything”.

Gawith said if people are turning up and it’s a toxic environment, they will get upset, noting that everybody is different in their reaction to these situations.

McBride said to summarise the issue, “it’s all about respect”. What that means has changed over the last 20 years. “Everybody has a right to come to work and not feel threatened.”

Moynihan agreed. “You can be civil to each other”, and noted that culture starts from the top of the organisation and flows through the workforce.

Find out more...

Factfile information

Organisation	Bathurst Resources New Zealand Coal & Carbon OceanaGold
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Resource	Canterbury Coal Echo Macraes
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