

Workplace safety attitude under fire

Staff Writer - Wed, 30 Aug 2023

Kiwi 'she'll be right' attitudes are a major factor in New Zealand's high workplace death rate and match American tolerance for gun deaths, says the chief executive of a health and safety organisation.

Wayne Scott, who heads mining and quarrying sector body MinEx, welcomes yesterday's publication of a [report](#) by the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum. It identifies Kiwi workplace death rates that are twice as high as those in Australia and four times those in Britain.



"I worked in Australia for 30 years including in health and safety roles; if someone dies in a workplace there, it's a big deal; here we tend to think – 'sh*t happens' – and move on."

Scott says every week this year on average, one or more New Zealanders will likely be killed in a workplace accident.

"Our acceptance of workplace injuries and harm has its comparisons with the preparedness of American society to live with gun violence – and most of us think that's crazy."

The worst death rates are among agriculture, forestry and construction workers in preventable accidents.

Inspectors, illnesses

Scott says the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum is right to observe the number of WorkSafe inspectors has fallen over the past 10 years from its target of 8.4 per 100,000 workers to 6.3.

"We have 213 inspectors. That's one for every 13,200 workers. We are seeing in our sector, as in others, that we have plenty of regulations but not enough regulators."

Scott says this contributes to the lax approach taken to health and safety in New Zealand and its high fatality toll in the workplace.

He says while losing at least one worker on average a week in a workplace fatality is bad, it's a fraction of the 750 or more Kiwis who die annually from illnesses related to their work.

"That's about twice our annual road toll which we devote huge budgets to reducing. Our hospital system can also expect to receive 100 people each week suffering from a variety of illnesses caused in their workplaces including musculoskeletal damage, cancers, respiratory harm and mental health issues.

"As much as America needs gun control, we need to end the toll of workplace injuries and health harm. The starting point is understanding that virtually all deaths and harm caused in workplaces is avoidable," Scott says.