



MEDIA RELEASE

12 June 2015

New data: Australian workforce overwhelmed by preventable health risks

SYDNEY: New findings released today by The Workplace Health Association of Australia (WHAA) show that preventable health risks are widespread across all occupational sectors with the average employee exhibiting 4 risk factors. Physical inactivity and stress are the most likely risks to be found.

The report *Health Profile of Australian Employees*, produced in conjunction with the University of Wollongong, examined the health characteristics of nearly 30,000 Australian workers gathered from workplace health assessments over the past decade.

The risk factors observed have been associated with chronic diseases including diabetes, heart disease, some cancers, and also mental illness.

The report found that 65% of employees reported moderate to high stress levels, and 41% had psychological distress levels considered to be "at-risk". Women were at greater likelihood of experiencing high psychological distress than men.

The report found that the majority of the workforce is not performing sufficient exercise to prevent health risks. Half the participants were found to be physically inactive.

Further low scores in risk categories associated with low physical activity were reported - two out of every three were overweight or obese (40.3% and 20.2%, respectively). Almost 1 in 8 (12.0%) workers had high blood pressure and nearly a quarter (23.8%) had high cholesterol. Men were more likely to have greater rates of high blood pressure/hypertension, BMI and waist circumference.

Excessive alcohol consumption remains an enduring risk factor. 11 percent of participants consumed alcohol at risky levels, with males three times more likely to exceed the current alcohol guidelines - 18.2% for males compared with 5.7% for females.

Despite legal requirements for smoke free workplaces, 11.5% of participants reported to be daily smokers.

Dr John Lang, CEO of the Workplace Health Association of Australia, says the findings are a cause of concern:

"This is an alarming insight into the poor levels of health experienced by most Australian workers. It highlights the urgency to deliver preventative actions in the workplace."

Employees participating in company sponsored health promotion programs showed some significant improvements in overweight/obesity (BMI) and high cholesterol between health checks. Health interventions would typically be performed in group; one on one; telephone or online settings.

Dr Lang questioned the logic behind the Federal Governments' withdrawal of promised funding to the states that was allocated through the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health saying:

“The impact of employee health on the performance and productivity of the Australian labour force dwarfs many of the productivity issues currently being tackled by State and Federal Governments. With national health care expenditure rising at more than double the inflation rate, prevention has to be a top priority.”

Christopher Magee from the University of Wollongong, and lead investigator on the study, agreed that these results are “concerning in terms of the apparent deteriorating psychological health of Australian workers”, and that this finding “emphasises the importance of addressing the rising cost and social impact of mental health problems to employers, communities and the health care system”.

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Editorial enquiries

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Dr Lang is available for interview

Workplace Health Association of Australia (WHAA)

WHAA is a national association of providers, organisations, practitioners, students and suppliers who have a belief and passion that the contribution of workplace health in Australia is of growing relevance and benefit to organisations, individuals and the growth of the Australian economy. (WHAA was formerly known as The Health and Productivity Institute of Australia - HAPIA). For further details visit www.workplacehealth.org.au