

Chronic fatigue a major safety risk



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As Health and Safety Compliance Manager at a major trucking firm, I have to consider all the various risks that our drivers and other staff could be exposed to while they are at work. The health and safety law introduced in 2015 has added to existing responsibilities, explained the duty of care and spelt out obligations across the whole business (note – this law was mainly already in place but had no bite to it. Terms were aligned to the Australian legislation).

Needless to say, there are some people out there in our industry that consider the new health and safety rules an overreaction on behalf of the last Government and lament the days when a she'll be right attitude was all the health and safety you ever needed. However, if one compares New Zealand's health and safety record with the UK, Australia or other relevant jurisdictions it is obvious that we have a lot we need to improve on.

The good news from what I have seen is that, not only in the business that I work in but around the industry, the majority of trucking companies take the new rules very seriously. There are some major improvements taking place across our industry.

When people consider health and safety they typically think of the physical risk of injury – falls, slips and hazards from the inappropriate use of heavy machinery. However, one of the biggest health and safety risks in the road transport industry, but something that is often overlooked, is chronic

fatigue among our drivers.

A large number of the guys and girls who drive professionally in New Zealand do so for many more hours than the average working week. Some push the upper limits of the work-time rules, meaning that they can be on the job for up to 70 hours a week, 13 hours a day. Even for the healthiest and fittest driver those kinds of hours can lead to higher levels of fatigue than most people experience at work.

While somebody falling asleep at their desk driving a computer is no big deal, doing that while in charge of a truck and trailer unit at 90km/h can have very serious consequences.

One of the most serious causes of chronic fatigue is sleep apnoea. This is a condition that is thought to affect around 16,000 adults in New Zealand; four percent of males and two percent of females. It is also twice as common in Maori males than it is in non-Maori males.

A team of scientists in Australia recently found that around 40 percent of commercial vehicle drivers were likely to suffer from sleep apnoea and that is despite most averaging seven to eight hours sleep a night.

“Some push the upper limits of the work-time rules”

The Australian research also determined that having obstructive sleep apnoea increased a driver's accident risk between two to seven times what it would normally be. It also concluded that long-distance commercial vehicle drivers have an elevated risk of developing obstructive sleep apnoea due to higher risk factors such as being more likely to be male, middle age and overweight.

In 2008 the Log Transport Safety Council here in New Zealand commissioned a report into the health and fitness of log truck drivers. It does not make pretty reading.

The report found that 39 percent of drivers were considered obese or very obese and another 42 percent were considered overweight.

So, if being overweight and unfit increases the likelihood of developing sleep apnoea or at the very least suffering from fatigue, and those conditions make having an accident more likely, then don't we all have a public responsibility to eat well and make the time to exercise?

Consider your wellness with colds, hay fever and hydration levels. Keep fluids up but forget the sugary sports drinks. Speak up if you feel fatigued and let your despatcher know.

For fleet managers this vigilance goes one step further as it is important to make sure that drivers showing signs of fatigue are supported in seeking treatment and given the time it takes to address it before the unthinkable happens at 90km/h. ■