



Dr Graham Gibson Jacobs MLA
Chairman
Education and Health Standing Committee
Parliament House
Perth WA 6000

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Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee
Inquiry into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers

24 September 2014

Dear Dr Jacobs

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee Inquiry into Mental Illness in Fly-in, Fly-out Workers in Western Australia.

This is a submission on behalf of the Sustainable Built Environment National Research Centre (SBEnrc), headquartered at Curtin University, leading a new research project: *Challenges for the FIFO/DIDO Workforce: Impacts on Health, Safety and Relationships*.

This project has been undertaken to understand more clearly, within the context of the fly-in, fly-out (FIFO)/drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) workforce, the impacts of health, safety and productivity in the workplace and the concomitant impacts they have on employee's personal, family and social relationships. The key objectives that our industry, Government and research project partners would like to draw to the attention of the Inquiry include:

1. Understanding more clearly how employee family relationships are affected by the FIFO/DIDO working environment and investigating solutions
2. Investigating the psycho-social health implications for employees in a FIFO/DIDO environment and seeking recommendations for change
3. An assessment of the impact of FIFO/DIDO travel on workplace health and safety incidents
4. An examination of rosters, shifts, work hours, job design and productivity demands and how to best design a safe, healthy and productive work environment for FIFO/DIDO employees

Australia is experiencing a rising trend in the number of FIFO and DIDO workers within the resource extraction and construction industries. There is limited previous research, which has sought to understand the implications associated with this unique workforce. As this workforce continues to

rapidly expand, there are new challenges for this industry with respect to the safe management of their workforce. The complexity of this workforce covers a range of factors, including:

- Roster design
- Shift work
- Working hours
- Performance
- Satisfaction
- Turnover
- Well-being
- Relationships
- Community issues

The view of the House of Representatives Standing Committee of Regional Australia (Feb 2013) is that FIFO/DIDO workforce is not simply a subset of the workforce whose needs can be anticipated under current frameworks. Importantly, it was identified that the workforces' needs across lifestyle and health (Recommendation 8), family support and maintenance of family relationships (Recommendation 9 & 10) and access to health care and medical services (Recommendations 4 and 19) provide an unknown matrix of impacts that distinguishes them from the standard resident workforce.

This project aims to extend upon the House of Representatives report into the effects of FIFO/DIDO and which recommend several sweeping changes, including further research. This collaborative industry research project is one of the first to take up the challenge issued by the Regional Australia Standing Committee, thus having more potency for its recommendations to be implemented as a result of this relationship. Further, industry should be able to act swiftly upon the recommendations and observations of this project to introduce varied working conditions on worksites, differential travel models for their workforce and a range of support programs for family and others in the home communities. In addition, industry should be able to reduce their turnover after a relatively short period of time with appropriate recruitment and selection and support programs for their workers.

We understand the Western Australia Committee's interest in inquiring into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers, with much of the literature into this specialised workforce often focusing on the popular debate between mental illness and relationship/family stresses¹. Further, connections are often made between occupation and suicide based on risk factors relating to the particular workplace or job role, type of employment, isolated workplace locations and shift work². The recommendations from the House of Representatives Standing Committee, plus ongoing research into this contemporary issue have identified the need for interventions and strategies to mitigate potentially detrimental effects at an individual, family, workplace and community level³.

The focus of the SBEnrc project is not around the therapeutic relationship. Rather, based on the recommendations from the House of Representatives, we believe it is important for this Inquiry to further consider the impacts of workplace and family relationship factors in collaboration with issues of mental health and view it as a holistic, systemic issue regarding the rate of FIFO suicides. We

¹ McPhedran, S., & De Leo, D. (2014). Relationship Quality, Work-Family Stress, and Mental Health Among Australian Male Mining Industry Employees. *Journal of Relationships Research*, doi:10.1017/2014.3

² McPhedran, S., & De Leo, D. (2013). Suicide Among Miners in Queensland, Australia: A Comparative Analysis of Demographics, Psychiatric History, and Stressful Life Events. *SAGE Open*, 3(4). doi: 10.1177/2158244013511262

³ Weeramanthri, T., & Jancey, J. (2013). Fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) work in Australia: the need for research and a health promotion framework. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 24(1), 5-6.

strongly believe that improvements in working conditions and relationship management for this workforce, their families, and their communities are crucial for the development and maintenance of positive mental health.

A one-page summary of the research project is attached for your information.

We would stress that this current research is simply addressing a range of issues that can be readily addressed within the timeframe and resources allocated. Future resources permitting, we would be very keen to address in detail further recommendations of the House of Representatives Regional Australia Standing Committee and would welcome any support from your inquiry to achieve these ends.

Please feel free to contact Adjunct Professor Herbert Biggs or Professor Keith Hampson for additional information or further discussions if required.

Yours sincerely,



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Project 2.32

Challenges for the FIFO/DIDO Workforce: Impacts on Health, Safety, and Relationships

RESEARCH PROGRAM 2: PEOPLE, PROCESSES AND PROCUREMENT

Australia is experiencing a rising trend in the use of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) workers within the resource extraction industry. Previous research aiding to understand the implications associated with this unique workforce has been limited, and as the workforce continues to expand rapidly, industry is faced with many new challenges for the safe management of this workforce. The complexity of this workforce covers a range of factors including roster design, shift work, working hours, performance, satisfaction, turnover, wellbeing, relationships and community issues.

There is growing evidence of unacceptable rates of turnover in the order of 35-45% in the construction and infrastructure FIFO/DIDO workforce. In addition there is evidence in exit interview that workers are leaving this workforce because of an inability to balance work and life demands, a feeling of isolation, and roster and work demands. There are urgent economic, and psychosocial reasons to understand the detrimental challenges of the FIFO/DIDO work environment and seek to reduce their effects.

This proposed research will seek to understand better the relationship between workplace requirements and personal and social relationships for the FIFO/DIDO workforce, assess the consequent impacts on workplace factors of health, safety and productivity and personal and family relationships, and recommend more effective next practice.

Objectives

Key objectives include:

- Understanding more clearly how employee family relationships are affected by the FIFO/DIDO working environment and investigating solutions
- Investigating the psychosocial health implications for employees in a FIFO/DIDO working environment and seeking recommendations for change
- An Assessment of the impact of FIFO/DIDO travel on workplace health and safety incidents
- An examination of rosters, shifts, work hours, job design and productivity demands and how to best design a safe, healthy, and productive work environment for FIFO/DIDO employees.

Industry Outcomes

The outcomes of this research could be used to design more effective, safer and healthier workplace activities including optimum rosters and shifts and more effective job re-design. More innovative and apt family and social support structures could be developed. This could include more realistic job previews for intending FIFO/DIDO workers and their families, and accessible and ongoing support services for home communities. Employers may improve their recruitments and selection processes to target best fit employees and reduce turnover as well as re-aligning shifts, rosters, and re-designing jobs for better OH&S outcomes.



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