

# Taking the heat out of workplace burn-out

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*With stress-related claims continuing to rise, health funds are looking at ways to help people become more active, writes Samantha Keen.*

Workplace stress costs companies, the government and health funds, a lot of money.

Stressed employees are calling in sick more often, their productivity is dropping when they are in the workplace and they are contributing to high rates of job turnover.

The National Health and Safety Commission (NHSC) in Australia, estimates that the total cost of workers' compensation claims for stress-related conditions is more than \$200 million every year. The NHSC says work-related stress accounts for the longest stretches of absenteeism. Research commissioned by Australian health fund Medibank Private in 2005 found that absenteeism is costing the Australian economy \$7 billion each year.

On top of that, research released in May 2007 by Medibank estimates the economic cost of presenteeism - where employers are at work without fully contributing because of an illness or an injury - as being \$25.7 billion in the financial year 2005-06.

Funds are concerned because the symptoms of job stress can add up to far more serious conditions over the longer term which, potentially, can become very costly, says Roger McBride, marketing director at Melbourne-based health insurance adviser, iSelect.

McBride says every year the amount health funds pay out in claims is increasing by 1 per cent.

"Health funds are putting together a lot of communication tools to promote healthy and active lifestyles," he says.

"One big focus is encouraging people to be proactive to prevent high blood pressure as it is one of the leading causes of kidney failure. Renal failure that requires dialysis or a kidney transplant costs the funds a lot of money each year."

Peter Sasson, president of the Private Health Insurance Intermediaries Association and executive consultant for health at corporate health benefits broker Jardine Lloyd Thompson, agrees that work stress and corporate burn-out is an issue that health funds take seriously. However, he adds that it is not easy to work out how much funds pay out in claims for this condition. Sasson says health funds do not currently have a defined category for workplace stress, or burn-out syndrome as it is often termed in Europe and the US, so the number of claims for this condition are not recorded. In addition, Sasson says that many claims for illnesses like depression, stress, heart conditions and even diabetes or cancer, can be related to long-term workplace stress, but they can also be influenced by other factors.

A landmark 20-year study by the University of London concluded that reactions to stress that were not managed were a more dangerous risk factor for cancer and heart disease than either cigarette smoking or high cholesterol foods.

Entitled: Neutralising Workplace Stress: The Physiology of Human Performance and Organisational Effectiveness the study was presented at a conference on psychological disabilities in the workplace at The Centre for Professional Learning in Toronto in 1996.

Many of the health insurers are targeting corporate clients with campaigns focusing on workplace stress, absenteeism and presenteeism.

For instance, Medibank Private has put together a tailor-made health cover for the corporate market which includes productivity tools which measure the health of employees. The corporate product is called Medibank Priority and provides employees with online access to measure their health in the areas of nutrition, exercise, stress and sleep.

Employers can then look at the overall health of the people in the workplace or of a department within the business, although they cannot tap into individual reports without direct permission of the employee.

The important question is then: what can people do about workplace stress?

The answer is somewhat mixed, since there are a number of different streams of thought on the best way to approach the problem.

Solutions vary between adjusting the workplace culture in favour of better health and adjusting individual habits to improve lifestyle.

Whichever way you look at it, experts agree that prevention is always better than cure. The good news is that several of the solutions are surprisingly simple. One of the easiest is to get enough sleep.

A survey commissioned by British-based Legal & General found that 42 per cent of the 5000 people in the survey, say that lack of sleep is their biggest health concern, followed by 34 per cent worrying about low-level, general fatigue.

The same report, entitled Quality of Working Life and carried out by Chartered Management Institute, shows that more than half of those surveyed experience feelings of constant tiredness at work and even more people suffer from insomnia. More than a quarter surveyed say they are stressed and another quarter admit to depression.

Another source of stress is an unrealistic, unbalanced work day, so work realistic hours and take a real break when the day is finished.

Reports say that burn-out is partly attributed to longer work hours, as technology takes the job home with us. Nonetheless, there is a need to manage jobs so as to get enough time off work.

In particular, email keeps workers at their desks longer and globalisation has meant many workers, particularly in finance, the media and law, work across time zones.

Exhaustion and stress is a real product of the way modern work is structured.

Its also important to find a way to exercise, meditate, or undertake some other form of relaxation to aid proper recuperation.

Sasson points out that many people deal with workplace stress through indulging in even more unhealthy relaxation practices.

"We've all seen that [workplace stress] translates into excessive use of alcohol," he says.

It is better to address problems of workplace burn-out before they become a real issue, say psychologists at the Australian Psychological Society.

## Statistics

- In Australia, the total cost of workers' compensation claims for stress-related conditions is estimated at more than \$200 million a year. According to the National Health and Safety Commission, work-related stress accounts for the longest stretches of absenteeism.
- The average cost of an Australian psychological injury claim has escalated in recent years to \$27,798 compared with a physical injury claim of \$18,913. The average time off work has increased to as long as 21 weeks compared with eight weeks for a physical injury claim (WorkCover NSW Statistical Bulletin 2003/04).
- A 1992 United Nations report labels job stress "The 20th Century Disease".
- The World Health Organisation says job stress has become a "worldwide epidemic".
- In the US, health care expenditures are almost 50 per cent higher for workers who report high levels of stress, according to the US Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.
- According to a US survey of 800,000 workers in more than 300 companies, the number of employees calling in sick because of stress tripled from 1996 to 2000, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work says. An estimated 1 million US workers are absent every day due to stress, it says.