Health promotion in FIFO and resident mine workforces: a case for a wellness-watch program

Sarah Goater1, Ian Goater2, Hugh Trivett3, Mark Knowles4, M Leveritt5, D Lynas1

1Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre, The University of Queensland, 2Medical School, College of Medicine, Biology and Environment, Australian National University, 3Mineral Resources, 4Traverse Drilling International, 5School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland

Fly-in-Fly-out (FIFO) mining workforce practices are currently the subject of a House of Representatives Standing Committee inquiry, and have received sustained media attention. A recent review of key themes arising from the inquiry identified potential impacts on health services in host and source communities. However, little attention has been given to workforce health in this debate.

This paper presents a case for a pilot ‘Wellness Watch’ health surveillance program, generated with a specific South Australian mine in mind that is serviced by a FIFO workforce. The health impacts of the FIFO lifestyle on individual worker health, mine safety performance, and workforce sustainability are explored more generally to include resident mine workers. The program rationale is collectively informed by a review of health literature and occupational health and safety surveillance data scheduled under various state legislative requirements.

Recommendations are offered on how health professionals might better collaborate with mineral resources researchers, mining industry workers and policy makers to create a step-change in workforce health status in the mining sector. A major premise of our arguments is that health promotion should be driven by the workforce community, in keeping with WHO guidelines. Input from health experts can be sought at strategic points but should not control the process.

While discussions presented are tailored to the rural and remote mining context, the underlying principles are considered applicable to broader workplace safety concerns. It is hoped the proposed pilot program might act as a catalyst for a national, industry-wide initiative for improving mining workforce health.