

HIGH SUICIDE RISK FOR CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

ACCESSEAP RECENTLY SHARED WITH EMCC THE RESULTS OF RESEARCH BY THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE FOR SUICIDE RESEARCH AND PREVENTION (AISRP) INTO SUICIDE AMONG CONSTRUCTION WORKERS IN QUEENSLAND. THESE LARGELY REFLECT NATIONAL FIGURES, ALTHOUGH ABS FIGURES SHOW THAT THE RATE OF SUICIDE IN QUEENSLAND HAS BEEN HIGHER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE FOR THE PAST 35 YEARS.

Among the alarming statistics to come out of this research are:

- Suicides are almost exclusively male, and in the 15-24 age group, the suicide rate for construction workers is more than twice the national average
- Every two days in Australia, a construction worker kills himself
- Construction workers are six times more likely to die from suicide than through a workplace incident (under the age of 24, it is 10 times more likely)
- The problem is greatest in NSW and WA – more than 40 workers kill themselves each year.

Psychological autopsy investigations and focus group discussions were conducted in a bid to understand the individual, industry, and work-home interface factors relevant in Commercial Building Construction Industry (CBCI) suicides.

Significant factors in the suicides were found to be:

- Alcohol and illicit drug use
- Relationship problems
- Depression and an undiagnosed or untreated psychiatric disorders.

Industry-related contributory factors that many readers will identify with included long working hours that affect the work/life bal-

ances and cause stresses at home, along with long transport distances between home and work, and the lack of a break due to job security issues; a male-centric industry that exacerbates relationship issues; and financial issues, including poor financial management.

Recommendations included:

- establishing a coordinated working group or advisory committee for overseeing suicide prevention activities for the BCI
- promoting awareness that suicide is a preventable problem within the industry
- reducing the stigma associated with help-seeking, mental illness, and suicide
- promoting well-being, resilience and coping
- enhancing positive environment in the workplace
- increasing workplace safety (e.g. managing drug & alcohol issues)
- providing career and financial advice to young males
- improving work conditions for vulnerable workers
- implementing suicide prevention training programs for volunteer 'gate-keepers'
- providing 'mentoring' services for 'new employees' to the industry
- providing support services for men experiencing specific difficulties
- providing services for families and partners of workers, who require support in coping with work-related stressors as well as any consequent family-related issues

- developing appropriate referral protocols and procedures for responding to workers who are identified as suicidal
- providing ongoing care for workers who attempt suicide, and
- providing appropriate bereavement support following a suicide or suicide attempt of an industry worker.

AccessEAP is a leading Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) provider in Australia that works closely with some construction organisations, and is shocked by the AISRP results. It believes that steps can be taken by individuals and managers of construction companies to ensure that their workers are safe.

Macela Slepica is Clinical Services Manager at AccessEAP, and has over 13 years of experience in EAP programs – the last four at AccessEAP. She sees her organisation's role as understanding the needs of an individual, team or organisation; and working to empower them to find solutions and to help themselves.

She sees the ideal support program as a holistic one that promotes well-being and mental wellness in all its aspects from physical to mental to emotional. Such a program can be seen as an investment rather than a cost, with the potential to reduce health care, improve morale and worker engagement, and reduce absenteeism.

The *State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia* report* by TNS Social Research and beyondblue concludes that a mentally healthy workplace can lead to employees being more committed to their job and less likely to seek alternative employment.

A key finding was that mentally healthy workplaces are as important to Australian employees as physically safe workplaces, but that workplaces are not meeting their expectations. □

FOOTNOTE:

* <https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/bl1270-report—tns-the-state-of-mental-health-in-australian-workplaces-hr.pdf?sfvrs>