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VICTORIA GETS SERIOUS ABOUT WORKPLACE HEALTH: \$1.8M PROJECT LAUNCHED

Victorian Health Minister the Hon. David Davis and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) have today launched a \$1.8 million program to improve health in Victorian workplaces.

VicHealth's *Creating Healthy Workplaces* Program includes the release of five international evidence reviews on how stress, gender inequality, alcohol, race-based discrimination and prolonged sitting at work contribute to chronic disease.

Along with the reports, four large statewide organisations will commence three-year pilot projects to find solutions to prevent workplaces from contributing to ill-health.

Victoria Police: researchers will work closely with Probationary Constables to identify the sources and effects of **job stress** experienced by recently inducted members and to use this information to develop more tailored, needs-based approaches to stress prevention.

YMCA: researchers will undertake project activity which builds equal relationships between men and women, increases women's representation and leadership in the workplace and creates a positive, **respectful and equitable culture** and working conditions.

Department of Human Services: researchers will design, implement and evaluate organisational and systems strategies for **reducing prolonged sitting** in office workers in SMART call centres.

Eastern Access Community Health: researchers will work with all levels of the organisation to test the efficiency of a range of **stress reduction initiatives**.

Thousands of Victorian employees will participate in the pilot programs, led by Australia's foremost researchers in workplace health. These will result in new evidence and practical tools for other workplaces to reduce risk factors for illness.

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said *Creating Healthy Workplaces* will prove valuable to all CEOs, executives, managers and human resources professionals to decide what critical role they can play in improving health.

"The evidence shows workplaces can harm our physical and mental health, but on the flipside, workplaces actually nurture good health," Ms Rechter said. "Given the huge cost of illness to business' bottom line, through lost productivity, recruitment costs and high staff turnover due to job-related illness, it makes good business sense for every CEO and organisation.

"Organisations can encourage staff to drink less alcohol, manage stress, to have respectful relationships or simply get moving more often. In this respect, workplaces really are the new frontier for health promotion."

Victoria Police Deputy Commissioner Graham Ashton said the pilot would see Victoria Police receive hands on guidance and assistance from experts to identify and address the sources of job stress and develop long-term approaches to prevent stress.

"Policing is regarded as one of the most stressful professions. It's not only the operational situations that our members face, like road trauma, domestic disputes, and emergencies such as floods and fires, but stress can also result from factors like the demands of the job, the support they receive from managers and colleagues and the relationships they have in the workplace," he said.

"In 2010/11, more than 23,000 shifts were lost through stress-related Workcover claims, so we acknowledge that this issue is an ongoing concern for Victoria Police. The benefits of preventing work-related stress are many - both for employees and the organisation as a whole - with fewer injuries and lost time, improved staff morale and job satisfaction, and better services to the community."

Key findings from research summaries

*Reducing **stress** in the workplace*

led by Associate Professor Tony LaMontagne of the University of Melbourne.

- Workplace stress contributes to cardiovascular disease and depression. It costs the Australian economy \$730 million every year, most of which is shouldered by employers.
- Workplace stress reduces productivity because of increased staff turnover, absenteeism and presenteeism (being at work but not focused on the job) and contributes to higher accident and injury rates, as well as higher healthcare costs and workers' compensation premiums.
- People who are most at risk of workplace stress are: younger people, working women, those in lower skilled occupations and precariously employed people (people in unstable employment).
- Workplace stress is experienced by 25 per cent of working women and 18 per cent of working men.
- Effective strategies to tackle workplace stress should be systematic, user-friendly and available to all workers in an organisation.

*Reducing **prolonged sitting** in the workplace*

led by Associate Professor David Dunstan of the Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute.

- Time spent sitting is associated with premature death, diabetes, and risk factors for cardiovascular disease, irrespective of time spent exercising in leisure time.
- Workplace sitting has risen in recent decades, largely due to the widespread availability of computers.
- Efforts to reduce workplace sitting will likely result in economic benefits for the health care system and for organisations and companies.
- Population groups that are most at risk of prolonged sitting include those working in offices, transportation (e.g. tram, train, taxi drivers) and highly mechanised trades.
- Workplace sitting reduction trial programs have shown a good or neutral impact on productivity, absenteeism and injury costs. No studies have suggested likely harm from sensibly implemented breaks from, or reductions in, workplace sitting time.
- We need to rethink the way we work and create opportunities for staff members to be active throughout the day. Standing workstations, walking meetings, walking groups, regular breaks, having face-to-face conversations instead of emailing are all strategies that can help.

*Reducing **alcohol-related harm** in the workplace*

led by Professor Steve Allsop of the National Drug Research Institute.

- Approximately 90 per cent of the Australian workforce consumes alcohol. The majority drink after work, or on days off, although sometimes it does occur during the working day.
- Harmful drinking outside work, as well as at work, can result in major health, social and economic consequences for the individual drinker, their families, organisations and society.

- Alcohol accounts for 3.2 per cent of the total burden of disease and injury in Australia – 4.9 per cent in males and 1.6 per cent in females.
- The impacts include workplace accidents and injuries, workplace fatalities, reduced productivity, poor work relations, and increased absenteeism and presenteeism.
- Lost productivity in the workplace attributable to alcohol costs \$3.5 billion annually.
- At-risk groups include men, young people aged 14–29 years, blue-collar workers and workers in agriculture, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, construction and financial services industries.

*Preventing **race-based discrimination** and supporting cultural diversity in the workplace,*
 led by Dr Yin Paradies of The University of Melbourne.

- Race-based discrimination causes ill health, especially poor mental health, and certain risky health behaviours.
- Organisations have a critical role to play in preventing race-based discrimination and supporting cultural diversity, and the subsequent benefits provide a compelling argument for action.
- Race-based discrimination in the workplace affects almost one in five Australians.
- The majority of race-based discrimination complaints relate to employment, with some evidence that race-based discrimination at work is on the rise in Australia.
- The proportion of people reporting 'not being promoted or treated fairly at work' due to race-based discrimination rose from approximately 12 per cent to 20 per cent between 2007 and 2009.
- Those most at risk of race-based discrimination are Indigenous Australians and people born overseas who speak a language other than English.
- Australians from Asian, Middle Eastern and African backgrounds appear to be more vulnerable than those from European backgrounds.

*Preventing **violence against women** in the workplace,*
 led by Associate Professor Donna Chung, University of Warrick (UK)

- Over 60 per cent of women report experiencing some form of violence at work (including physical, sexual, psychological, emotional forms of violence) and 75 per cent report experiencing unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour at work.
- Violence against women has significant effects on women's physical and mental health as well as their material and financial stability. These can include premature death, physical injuries, depression, anxiety and social isolation.
- Intimate partner violence cost the Australian economy an estimated \$13.6 billion during 2008–2009.
- Violence against women increases staff turnover, absenteeism and presenteeism. It impacts negatively on workplace productivity, employee health and wellbeing, staff morale and the organisation's image and reputation.
- Within workplaces, women employed in sectors involving direct services to the public (e.g. health, retail and hospitality) are at a particularly high risk of client-initiated violence.
- Research shows that in order to prevent violence against women from happening in the first place, we must promote a culture of respectful, equal relationships.
- There is an average 17 per cent gender pay gap in Australia and women are vastly underrepresented in board and management positions (particularly government, judiciary and private sector).

Review summaries and full research reports are available for download at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/workplace