Train drivers on Perth’s suburban rail system are more likely to witness a suicide attempt than any other workers in Western Australia.

Such an event can have profound emotional consequences for drivers who see people kill themselves while being powerless to do anything to stop it from happening.

One night in 1990, transit guards employed by the Public Transport Authority questioned a young man about painting graffiti on railway property. When they told him that they would summons him, he replied by saying that he didn't care and that he was not going to be here anyway! They assumed he was going to do a runner and travel away from WA. Forty minutes later he jumped from behind a steel box near the tracks at Bassendean straight in front of a train driven by Peter Veenstra.

"There’s nothing I could do except whack on the brakes and hope for the best", Peter told SafetyWA.

“Every muscle tenses and you just sit there knowing what’s going to happen, then you hear the hit!”

Despite the shock, Peter didn’t take any time off.

“I went home that night and had a Milo and good talk about it to my wife”, he said.

Peter returned to work the next day, turning down offers of counselling.

Peter now spends a lot of his working hours in the depot as a shed driver and as such, is one of the first to be chosen to go out to relieve drivers when fatalities occur.

He said that he has seen about 25 fatalities, witnessing the often horrific consequences.

Transit guards attend a death knowing what to expect but for a train driver at the end of a long shift, the effect of someone unexpectedly jumping on the tracks can be a devastating experience.

“They may be about to kill themselves”, he said, “but it is like they are attacking me personally.”

As a safety representative, Peter Veenstra has spoken to many train drivers who have been through the experience.

“We try to keep it impersonal. You’d go crazy if you started to learn about their lives.”

Peter said that he wanted people to know about the indignity of a train suicide.

“And there is no guarantee that you will die. Quite possibly you will be limbless or confined to a wheel chair!”

Under new guidelines, drivers witnessing a suicide must have counselling, be drug tested and have time off to undergo a psychological evaluation.

The PTA has recently launched a hard-hitting campaign to encourage all rail users not to trespass on the tracks.

The impact of suicides on drivers

Death on the train tracks

NOVEMBER 2006

Continued on back page
Emotional & Psychological Wellbeing

By Maria Saraceni, Partner, Deacons

Objectives of the Occupational Health and Safety Act include promoting and securing the safety and health of persons at work and further assisting in securing safe and hygienic work environments. However, none of the words “safe”; “health”; and “hygienic” are defined in the Act.

The question to be asked – what do these words encompass? Without doubt they extend beyond hazards that pose a risk to a person’s physical wellbeing. But, do they extend to hazards that pose a risk to a person’s emotional, psychological or psychosocial wellbeing?

With the recent introduction of codes of practice addressing the hazards involved in workplace fatigue and bullying, the latter category is now part of our regulatory scheme. But what of the two former categories?

In working environments where it is reasonably foreseeable that employees may be confronted with suicide such as train drivers; counter-terrorist operatives or correctional/prison officers; what is the extent of the employer’s duty under the Act?

Must the employer take the employee as he finds him with all his predispositions and susceptibilities and his individual emotional and psychological responses to suicide? How shall an employer meet his obligations?

This article scratches the surface of this dilemma – it is beyond its scope to provide an answer.

The case of Jarvis v ACM Pty Ltd involved a 35-year-old correctional officer who, before commencing work, had passed medical and psychological testing and successfully completed a seven week training course. He was considered of robust character and assessed as able to cope with prison work.

During a twelve month period, Jarvis was required to attend a number of attempted suicides at his place of work – a hanging, a slashing of wrists, a slashing of arms/legs/stomach followed by another hanging. Following each incident, Jarvis was denied any breaks and resumed his normal duties almost immediately.

At no stage was he offered any counselling or debriefing. Jarvis developed post-traumatic stress disorder which the court found was due to an unsafe work environment and an unsafe system of work due to poor resourcing; poor training and inadequate managerial support.

The suicide rate among inmates was intertwined in the quality of the work environment. Reducing inmate suicides was part and parcel of providing a safer system of work.

The court held that the employer was obliged to take reasonable steps to provide a system of work which was reasonably safe while having regard to the high risk occupation involving work which was hazardous to an employee’s mental and physical health in a highly volatile environment. In the circumstances, the employer breached its obligations.


Do the issues address both a safe system of work and the health of an employee and whether dealing with the former will necessarily take care of the latter?

Whatever the response is, the employer’s non-delegable duty under the Act (and for the negligence ay common law) is clear. It does extend to emotional and psychological risks reasonably arising from hazards which are reasonably foreseeable.

Ageing workforce issues

Water Corporation adopts new strategies

The problems of an ageing workforce in an organisation where manual labour is a fundamental element of its daily business, is being addressed through new safety initiatives developed by the Water Corporation.

These were outlined at a Safety Networking after-hours function hosted by IFAP as part of RAC Community Safety Month.

Claire Preston, an OSH consultant to the Water Corporation, who has helped developed the corporation’s field ergonomics program, told the gathering that three-quarters of the Water Corporation’s staff were aged above 40, with the largest number in the 51-plus age bracket.

This made it essential for the corporation to seriously address ways of minimising manual handling injuries. Eighty per cent of all of the injuries among operational staff are back injuries.

She explained that one of the current control strategies was to make field equipment and tools as ergonomic and as light and easy to use as possible.

“For instance, to reduce physical strain, we are designing lighter weight gate lids and chlorine trolleys and making more use of valve actuators.”

Other new strategies include redesigning depots to provide optimal storage solutions and best ergonomic practice. One example is the provision of the best equipment at the right height for loading vehicles.

The Water Corporation has also appointed “manual handling champions” to drive home the manual handling message throughout the organisation.

Claire Preston admitted that some long term staff members were stuck in their ways and resented change, but well respected managers were gaining success in altering these attitudes.

She says that because the program remains in its early stages it is too soon to assess whether the initiatives have lowered or affected the corporation’s LTI’s or reportable incidents. However, she has detected a definite increase in awareness with an increase in the number of hazards being reported.
Case Study

An Enviable Record

Government Department Wins Gold Award

A government department with the enviable record of no lost time injuries in the past year is determined to maintain this performance in the years ahead.

During the 12-month period, the WA Department of Industry and Resources, which has 1000 staff, reported just ten claimable incidents, with seven of these related to slips, trips and falls.

The OSH team at DoIR leaves no stone unturned in its quest to achieve excellence in occupational safety and health.

It’s this commitment which led to DoIR becoming a Gold Safe Way Achiever in the 2006 IFAP/CGU Safe Way Awards.

DoIR’s Manager Corporate OSH, Stephen Sandilands, has given an example of the lengths his team will go to in ensuring workplace safety.

He says that outside the department’s headquarters on the corner of Adelaide Terrace and Plain Street in Perth, a yellow line has been painted along the edge of the pavement where some staff had minor trips. Fortunately nobody’s been injured, but the OSH team identified that at different times of the day it’s difficult to identify a change in the pavement height. Painting the yellow line along the edge has resolved that problem.

Stephen Sandilands says he doesn’t subscribe to the view of making safety an organisation’s No. 1 priority. “Instead”, he says “DoIR endeavours to make safety an attribute of the way we do our work just like quality, so that it becomes ingrained in all we do.”

The principles espoused by US psychology professor, Scott Geller and Canadian occupational health specialist Alan Quilley are strongly supported by Stephen Sandilands and his team.

Both Geller and Quilley are committed to observational learning and DoIR has embraced the “buddy” system or mentoring.

After they are trained, DoIR’s safety representatives aren’t left to their own devices. Instead OSH and HR management make themselves available to discuss issues, review documents and inspection reports as well as assisting step by step through investigations, following up on hazard recommendations and reviewing suggestions.

As part of induction and staff refresher training, DoIR also provides updates on legal precedents and cases to highlight consequences both organisationally and individually. Stephen Sandilands says it is easy to obtain examples of accidents that occur across the globe which are relevant to specific workplace matters.

He explains the group’s focus as communication, consultation, feedback and leading by example.

In a Geller-like manner, DoIR emphasises supportive recognition of individual achievement and believes that seeking continuous improvement not only develops rapport, but demonstrates genuine commitment to the process and activities involved.

Over the past year, most of DoIR’s senior managers have received specialised OSH training leading to a perceptible change in the broad overall culture of how safety is viewed in the organisation.

“We aim at updating every member of our staff once a year which means putting about 20 staff a week through four-hour sessions.”

Stephen Sandilands believes it is important to maintain face-to-face contact with all of DoIR’s staff so that a personal involvement and a genuine interest can be maintained which he says is critical from a safety perspective.

Also important is prompt resolution of any issues that are raised. Hazard reports are tied to building services requests so that they can be tracked and followed through, making sure that they are resolved.

Stephen Sandilands notes that in the past three decades OSH has seen constant change and says it is of the utmost importance that any OSH system or initiatives developed by an organisation must not only meet its needs but be flexible enough to respond to this inevitability.

He quotes from Alan Quilley: “Safety and quality are never accidents; they are always the result of intelligent effort!”
Handling 90,000 employees

Finding an effectively consistent way of managing risk across a diverse organisation with 90,000 employees spread across 100 countries, is the awesome challenge that's been effectively achieved by Dr Maggie Goldie.

Dr Goldie, who is Vice President of Environment, Health and Safety for Tyco Fire and Security (TFS), is a keynote speaker at IFAP’s Safety2006 Conference during November.

Dr Goldie was appointed to her current position to develop an effective strategy to manage risk across every region of Tyco’s fire and security business.

She told SafetyWA that the first step was to establish a consistent framework and communicate it globally.

The second step was to simultaneously educate and train both the TFS management team and the employees.

This was achieved by developing a two-day workshop, focusing on interactive communication and embracing case studies based on the Tyco organisation.

After assessing training needs to cover the major risks faced by the workforce, a series of online training modules were developed for employees to access at a convenient time with inbuilt quizzes at the end of each module.

This was aimed at enhancing the hands-on training that is provided to staff in facing specific risks from working at height, electricity, pressurised gasses, confined spaces, driving, working alone and working in environments where other people are in control such as construction and other client sites.

Ensuring that appropriate checks and balances were in place was the next part of the strategy.

"Because we work in a lot of countries where we don’t always have professional EHS people, we have to rely on a network of coordinators to provide information about incidents that occur."

Tyco has established a special matrix to help it accurately report all environment, health and safety matters.

The corporation also has a specialised auditing program covering several levels. Regular site inspections are carried out at each location along with self assessments developed so each individual business within the group can self audit to develop corrective action.

To do this they use a check list that looks at both their management systems and compliance issues.

Maggie Goldie says that the next level of auditing is conducted by EHS (environment, health and safety) professionals. “They look closely at the implementation of standards and procedures and how they are complying with both local legislation as well as Tyco directives.

These results are put onto an on-line data base that tracks and reports on the closures of the findings.

According to Dr Goldie it is essential when managing risk “to examine where we are each year and set objectives for the year ahead.”

The goals are based on training, self audits, outcomes and compliance audits.

Meeting a global challenge

Handling 90,000 employees

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Restaurants targeted

Concern over work-related injuries

WA’s restaurants are being targeted by WorkSafe inspectors following concern about the high rates of work-related injuries being reported.

A prominent Cottesloe restaurant, The Blue Duck Café – was recently fined $1500 for failing to adequately guard a piece of machinery in its kitchen after pleading guilty in the Perth Magistrates Court.

WorkSafe WA Commissioner Nina Lyhne explained that a dough mixer was being used without the required guarding.

Ms Lyhne said there were many cases where employees have had fingers amputated or even lost limbs after they became tangled in machinery.

The most common causes of injury in restaurants are manual handling problems and slips and trips, especially in kitchen areas.

WorkSafe inspectors are visiting randomly-selected restaurants in metropolitan and regional areas to assess hazards.

Ms Lyhne suspects that because a high number of casual and transitory workers are employed in WA’s 1100 restaurants, a high number of injuries go unreported.
WA school children spread the safety message

Excellent response to calendar competition

“Don’t be a Wally, use a trolley!” ... "Wear the right gear so you can still hear!” ... and “You are smarter than smoking!” are three of the slogans chosen from entries received from 22 primary schools throughout WA that participated in this year’s Safety Calendar Competition.

Organised by IFAP as an RAC Community Safety Month initiative, the competition is designed to enhance awareness of safety and health issues at grass roots level.

Students were asked to discuss safety issues with their families to gain an understanding of hazards in the workplace and at home and the measures that may be taken to reduce risks.

The results are the 16 illustrated messages that form part of the 2007 IFAP Safety Calendar.

Four of this year’s winners are from Ardross Primary School where Principal Andrew Holmes says “the competition is a very effective way of initiating discussions at home so that when Mum and Dad go off to work the safety message is in the back of their minds.”

“We have a healthy school community committee at Ardross which is heavily committed to ensuring that safety, health and physical education activities are given a high priority.”

Barbaro Dowding from the Office of Crime Prevention, the government department responsible for Community Safety Month, is particularly pleased with the response to Community Safety Month.

“This is the event’s third year. In the first year we had 106 events, while this year there more than 350”, she said.

The IFAP Safety Calendar, sponsored for the third year by Main Roads WA, has proven to be a very effective way of transmitting the safety message.
Reflections

Consistency important

Continuing the series of reflections by Western Australians who have made a significant contribution to occupational safety and health.

Richard Mehan believes legislation covering occupational safety and health is likely to become more intense.

The Portman boss believes that the push to make workplaces fatality free and to minimise injuries will lead to increased legislative change.

Richard Mehan, an IFAP board member, is Managing Director of Portman Limited, and has spent 26 years in the resources industry, the last eight with Portman.

He oversees operations involving about 600 full time staff supplying iron ore to the Chinese and Japanese markets from its WA mines at Koolyanobbing near Southern Cross and Cockatoo Island off the north west coast.

He says that to lessen the need for governments to keep changing OSH laws, industry needs to stay ahead of the game and must not relent on focussing on safety as one of the key drivers of business.

“We need to be serious about it on a continuous basis and always look at ways of doing it better!”

Richard says that he developed an acute awareness of the mining industry as an inherently dangerous place when he worked with the mining giant Rio Tinto, a company with an extremely strong commitment to the safety of its workforce.

Safety, he says, is a very big issue at the board room table of all major mining companies. “Boards are very focussed on ensuring that their managers are dealing with safety issues in an appropriate way.”

Maintaining consistency in legislation across Australia is important according to Richard Mehan. “We are not opposed to strong legislation, but it is important to get consistent responses.”

He believes that legislation across the ten jurisdictions in Australia generally achieves this consistency but says he would not welcome to Western Australia “the big stick” approach of penalties which often applies in New South Wales.

The Portman MD acknowledges that a major issue for safety in WA is the shortage of qualified regulatory staff in the Resources Safety Division of the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection.

“We are very conscious that DOCEP has felt the pressure of both skill shortages and experienced staff being attracted to the higher salaries available within industry”.

A strong regulator is important, he says. “You’d hope that companies will always do the right thing, but history tells you that’s not always the case.”

While the mining majors are all committed to good safety outcomes, it is essential that smaller companies play by the safety rules too and it’s reasonable to expect that they will come under regular scrutiny.

Earlier this year, Richard Mehan mentioned to IFAP president Dan Smetana that he was keen to join the board of a not-for-profit organisation. Dan had little trouble convincing him that he should join the IFAP board which oversees what he calls “an impressive and well run organisation”.

When he’s not at his desk at Portman’s William Street headquarters or attending meetings or conferences across the globe, Richard Mehan probably has his nose in a book.

He admits that reading is a great passion which he can easily combine with his business travels. “And he says he stays fit by spending lots of time in the gym!”

Licences for high risk work

New regulations from July 2007

All forklift operators in Western Australia will require a licence when a new national standard for those involved in high risk work takes effect next year.

Currently, WorkSafe issues competency certificates for forklift work on a non-compulsory basis.

The National Licensing Standard, aimed at ensuring that workers have the skills and knowledge to perform high risk work, safely and competently, will replace the current Certificate of Competency.

The new licence, compulsory from July 1, 2007, will be renewable every five years and covers all work currently considered to be high risk, including scaffolding, dogging and rigging and crane, hoist and pressure equipment operation.

Building business value by being proactive

By Darren Thomas, Regional Manager (West), CGU Safety & Risk Services

The theories of excellent safety management are often lost in translation. Businesses are constantly looking to practical safety solutions that support the theories in order to improve safety at the workplace.

Insurance Australia Group (IAG) is Australasia’s leading general insurance group and includes CGU among its many brands. Internationally, IAG employs more than 12,000 staff, a challenging safety management environment.

Building an award winning safety culture with an atmosphere of shared attitudes and values, along with a consistent approach, has shaped the group’s improved safety performance. Every member of staff feels responsible for safety and pursues it on a daily basis.

IAG recognised a need to improve its OSH performance and injury/illness rates. The first step in the process, which is testament to popular safety management theories, was IAG’s decision to commit to the process of improvement at a very senior level.

With the CEO assuming the role of Chief Safety Officer, IAG is able to focus on key priority areas to underpin development of OSH strategies and improve its safety management system. For example, the key priorities as supported at senior levels, include leadership, communication, use of technology and risk management decentralisation. Stemming from this commitment, the safety initiative “besafe” was formed.

“besafe” encourages employee contributions through communication strategies chosen by employees, which introduced the SEE, THINK, DO concept. Its aim is for employees to take action to identify and resolve OSH issues themselves.

The “besafe” programme is complemented by a range of other OSH initiatives including online training for all employees and managers; an electronic hazard, accident and incident reporting process and the introduction of an internal Risk RadarTM, an online OSH self-assessment process.

The commitment to OSH is seen in safety targets incorporated into senior management’s incentive schemes. At the same time, the role of elected safety and health representatives, first aid officers and fire wardens underpins the success experienced at IAG with regard to safety.

The group’s OSH management system is consistent with best practice ideologies. It aims to meet and exceed legislative compliance at the same time as maintaining a consistent safety experience for employees.

Policy, planning, implementation, evaluation and improvement are the cornerstones of the IAG safety management system. These theories are no different to many in modern safety management. The practical message stemming from a large organisation’s improved safety performance is that “besafe” is a simplified risk management system.

Excellent safety management need not be complicated. Using the people in an organisation, while gaining commitment at senior levels and measuring performance, makes continued improvement possible for all organisations.

Lack of compliance causes concern

With increasing numbers of employees working from home, a prominent Perth lawyer believes that laws covering occupational safety and health may have to be adjusted to catch up with this phenomenon.

A survey of 280 employers by the Sydney Chamber of Commerce found that only one third of participants were aware that they were legally required to enforce OSH standards for employees working outside the corporate office.

Tim Mason, an insurance/OSH partner with Jackson McDonald says that he is surprised how many people don’t know their responsibilities.

“How may think their responsibilities are limited to making an ergonomic assessment of such things as chairs and computers”, he says. “They may not think that they have to check the stairs to see if they are safe and they may neglect to ask questions about whether there are any children who could cause stress.”

Tim Mason agrees with suggestions that working from home may be a sleeper like workplace bullying and is concerned that there will eventually be liability issues for employers.

One organisation which is living up to its OSH responsibilities is Westpac Banking. Employes who want to work from home must sign an agreement, pass a test showing that they understand occupational safety and health principles and submit to regular inspections of their workspace.

In the past decade, Westpac has not had a compensation claim from a home office worker.

While believing that these measures comply with the onerous requirements of current OSH laws, Tim Mason is concerned about the economic effects on small businesses.

He points out, however, that many companies are saving “a heap of money” by allowing people to work home through reduced overheads and not having to provide workplace facilities. “Is it unfair then to expect that some of these savings should go towards making sure that the home environment is safe?”

For some organisations, the solution has been to bring their workers back to their main offices. Among these is Hewlett-Packard which is locating workers in several core sites to get more face-to-face interaction and to increase their operational effectiveness.

Tim Mason believes that the solution may be a joint approach with shared responsibility. “If an employer is doing the right thing and carrying out inspections everything is fine, but once the inspector leaves everything changes such as the ergonomic equipment being put away. Then it becomes the employee’s responsibility.”

“It’s all a matter of common sense, really”, he says.
Peter Veenstra, PTA driver

Peter said that everyone reacts differently. “Some guys would be better off going straight back to work, others go through depression and anxiety and fall to pieces.”

Earlier in his 28-year career, a suicide was a rare occurrence which stunned all the drivers. “It’s too common these days. You can come to work and not even know there was fatality three days ago”, he said.

According to the acting secretary of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, Phil Woodcock, when they go to work all drivers face the real possibility that they may kill someone without being able to do anything to stop it.

“One instance itself can result in a driver’s career being finished because of the trauma it causes.”

Psychologist Ross Eatt told SafetyWA that everyone who witnessed a violent death should discuss it with a psychologist.

“Once most people are over the initial shock of such a dreadful event, they usually go into denial and avoidance and refuse to talk about it.”

Men in particular liked to give the appearance of coping by throwing out their chests and gritting their teeth. But by doing this, the event remained “floating around in their head” and down the track something comparatively minor could happen which triggered the full reaction that has been bottled up!

Ross spoke of a recent incident involving a bus driver who had been involved in a number of unpleasant events and appeared to get over them by soldiering on.

“But it was the final straw when a bottle thrown from the roadside hit the windscreen of his bus, and although it was a comparatively minor incident it spun him right out.”

The driver’s recovery has been very slow.

The Public Transport Authority won’t reveal figures showing the number of suicides faced by WA train drivers, but in Melbourne, metropolitan train drivers witnessed 30 suicides in a 12-month period.

However, the PTA’s concern about the increased number of people trespassing on the city’s rail lines and behaving recklessly, has led to a graphic campaign to ram home the dangers of being on the tracks.

It is particularly targeted at the Armadale line, which has the highest incidence of trespass in WA.

Violence, aggression and bullying are serious occupational safety and health issues. In Western Australia each year, an average of more than 600 workers’ compensation claims for time off work arise from workplace violence and bullying.

And that’s only the reported cases. The reality is that many more incidents of workplace violence and aggression occur without ever being reported.

With recent court rulings in NSW resulting in a school being fined for breaching the OHS Act as a result of violence to teachers, it is becoming important that organisations develop and implement procedures that address such issues.

So what constitutes violence, aggression and bullying in the workplace?

In order to define this, the WorkSafeWA Code of Practice separates bullying from violence and aggression. It says that violence and aggression are actions or incidents in which a person is physically or psychologically harmed by another person.

Interestingly, the other person does not necessarily have to be a co-worker; it can be a customer or visitor to the organisation.

Similarly, bullying at work can occur between staff members, or between staff and clients, students, visitors and other external contacts. According to the Code of Practice, bullying is defined as “repeated unreasonable or inappropriate behaviour directed towards a worker, or group of workers, that creates a risk to health and safety”. Bullying can often include violent and aggressive acts; however, violence and aggression does not necessarily include bullying.

It is the intention of the Code of Practice to act as a guide to workplaces where employees may be subjected to forms of violence, aggression and bullying. In doing so, WorkSafe WA clearly defines violence, aggression and bullying and includes information on hazard identification and risk assessment.

In dealing with violence and aggression, the Code of Practice takes a hazard management perspective and goes through each step in detail providing the reader with a practical approach to dealing with such issues.

The Code of Practice looks in depth at identifying possible violent and aggressive situations, assessing the risk involved should such situations occur, and implementing and controlling measures to eliminate or reduce the risk of injury or harm.

Particularly useful is the “Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment Form” and the “Checklist” which can be adopted to suit any industry. While these documents relate to the examples discussed, they are simple in layout, easy to use and easily transferable to any workplace.

On bullying, the Code of Practice not only suggests clear steps on how to deal with it in the workplace; it also goes into detail about how to prevent incidents from occurring. Given the complexity of the subject, the Code of Practice does an excellent job of providing readers with useful and practical ways of dealing with bullying incidents, as well as how to resolve them if they occur.

The Code of Practice is extremely useful in that it presents practical and transferable information that would prove particularly beneficial to policy writers, management, HR personnel and safety representatives.

The Code of Practice on Violence, Aggression and Bullying at Work is available on the WorkSafe WA website, www.worksafe.wa.gov.au or for a hard copy, by emailing safety@docep.wa.gov.au.

Book Review

Code of Practice
Violence, Aggression and Bullying at Work 2006

Reviewed by Luisa Padilla, IFAP Technical Officer

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