

Driver fatigue: More than tuckered truckers

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For a significant number of years, considerable concern has been expressed at the issue of driver fatigue, particularly among the long distance road haul industry. Whilst traditionally the main focus has been on drivers and operators, developments since 2000 have more broadly considered and ultimately led to the concept of a 'chain of command' approach. This has in turn led a number of jurisdictions to introduce, as a supplement to already existing road traffic controls, formal legislative and regulatory processes that require the development and implementation of fatigue management plans.

Naturally, there has to be a starting point for the application of these controls. With the focus of the legislation and regulation so far being primarily on the heavy vehicle industry, in NSW, this has been set at a commencement point of applying to journeys carrying freight for more than 500km and to all vehicles with a Gross Vehicle Mass (GVM) of more than 4.5 tonnes.

What about other commercial road users?

Whilst the new fatigue management framework for heavy vehicle users has resulted in improvements in fatigue management and will continue to have this impact so long as complacency and lack of funded enforcement do not set in, what about other commercial road users who fall outside the above framework? There are a wide range of employment-related situations where people who are not specifically employed as 'professional drivers', but for whom driving is a significant element of the related activities of their work, fall outside these guidelines.

Persons conducting a business or undertaking (the new terminology in the harmonised Work Health and Safety framework) have an explicit obligation to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of workers (the expanded definition replacing employees in the harmonised Work Health and Safety framework) under their relative state OHS/work safety legislation. However, I see many companies that have not yet even identified fatigue as a potential, let alone specific, work safety issue that applies to their business.

Examples of others who may be affected by fatigue

The following are some examples of fatigue-related issues that could arise for businesses not in heavy transport where, if there was a specific accident able to be proven as a result of fatigue, could face specific prosecution by their relevant work safety regulator.

Example A: A country-based community service organisation, covering a large area, that provides counselling and support services for youth and aged persons.

The base for this organisation may be in one or more locations, and staff may be required to drive up to 200km in any one day. On top of this driving, they may call in and see up to six to eight clients and provide services such as one-on-one counselling or, in some cases, physical personal care services such as bathing, feeding, domestic cleaning, etc.

Whilst the 200km drive in itself would not be considered likely to result in fatigue, in combination with the other activities it may well be, particularly if the client work is stressful or physically demanding and is followed by a relatively long journey back to home base.

Couple this with particular issues related to time of year (in winter it can be dark by 4.30pm) and wildlife (kangaroos and wombats come out from just before dusk onwards), and this could easily be an issue that needs to be managed not just from a fatigue management basis but from the basis of worker health and safety.

Example B: A small Canberra-based Commonwealth agency that is preparing for a Senate inquiry.

During the lead-up to the Senate inquiry, most senior managers have been working long hours, preparing information and material to submit to and present before the inquiry. Many of the staff members concerned are starting as early as 6am and working until 11pm, and this goes on for about three weeks. At the end of the day, the staff members who have been working 17-hour days get into their cars (some are packaged cars through salary sacrifice) and drive home, with some journeys of up to half an hour.

Whilst this may appear somewhat unremarkable, the agency is not aware that the fatigue-related effect on the staff of working these hours means that at the time of their journey home, it is estimated that they are as affected as if they had been drinking to above the 0.05 blood alcohol limit.

The issue that follows is twofold. If one of the persons is involved in an accident on the way home, whilst there may not be a workers' compensation issue (the Commonwealth withdrew journey coverage in 2005), there is, firstly, the issue of potential prosecution for failing to provide a safe system of work and, secondly, the issue of potentially losing a key member of staff and the associated corporate knowledge. This is on top of the potential that the accident may involve another vehicle and result in serious injury or death to an innocent road user.

Work safety responsibilities

Whilst both of the examples outlined above may appear to be somewhat implausible, they are nonetheless completely possible and should be identified as part of the risk exposure that the business or activity faces and must manage as part of doing business. Many employers struggle with the concept of risk management where the risks go beyond the standard slips, trips and falls, but have a clear responsibility to identify, assess and control such risks.

Persons who are in control of any business or undertaking must take a broad view of the risks associated with work and, in relation to those risks involving potential fatigue during the use of a vehicle, must look beyond just the long journey to the combination of the work done during the day and the journey itself. It is only when these aspects are managed together that successful fatigue management for journeys involving the use of vehicles will be treated to the same level of scrutiny and management as the framework applied to heavy vehicles.

Summary

According to the NSW Road Traffic Authority (RTA), for the 12 months ended July 2010, 19.5% of all fatal accidents that occurred in NSW were able to be proven to have had fatigue as a major if not the primary element. Whilst strict fatigue management will have some impact on improving this element for the heavy vehicle industry, only action on the part of the general community and by persons in control of businesses will have an impact on the rest of the road users.

Driver fatigue is an issue for more than just the heavy vehicle industry and long distance truck drivers. It is an issue for every business, every time someone has to get into a vehicle and drive somewhere to do work. Every business has an obligation to identify, assess and control the risks associated with vehicle use, not just when they think about it, but all the time.

Blue Care road safety program

by Mark Stephens, Fleet Manager, Blue Care

This paper outlines how Blue Care moved fleet safety from an era where there was minimum focus on crash frequency or driver risk analysis and no training, to today, where fleet safety is a core function of the Fleet Management Unit. This case study reviews the processes Blue Care undertook to reduce crash rates which included (a) comprehensive risk analysis, (b) driver education, (c) thoughtful vehicle selection and (d) the development of industry partnerships to achieve the desired outcomes.

Who is Blue Care?

Blue Care is one of Australia's largest not-for-profit aged care providers with a diverse range of community and residential care services that engage with most special needs groups, specialised community social and health agencies, and the acute health care sector. Blue Care services cover large geographic regions in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Blue Care's Residential Aged Care Services operate 4240 residential aged care beds and provide over 1.5 million days of care per annum. Blue Care also delivers in excess of 3 million occasions of service annually for community clients in their homes or in our community centres.

Fleet snapshot – History of growth

Since 1953, Blue Care has been delivering community nursing services. During the early days, community nurses used public transport to travel to clients' homes. Since those early beginnings, the Blue Care fleet has grown to over 1500 vehicles

that travel over 32 million kilometres per annum. This includes staff using their own vehicles. Prior to 2005, vehicles were managed at a local level using a spreadsheet or simple database. From 2005, all vehicle management was centralised on an outsourced fleet management database with the physical management split between a contracted fleet management company and the Blue Care fleet unit of four full-time staff.

Since the amalgamation of fleet from a locally managed model to a centrally managed model, the number of vehicles has grown from 1300 to over 1500 in 2010. This number will continue to grow as the demand for more community services increases. The current fleet consists of 950 pool passenger cars, 350 salary vehicles, and 200 bus people movers, light commercials and trucks.

The motivation - Vehicle crash and infringement history

Until 2008, Blue Care did not provide a coordinated staff education program in road safety or have a risk analysis process in place to identify poor driving and potential driver or vehicle risks. From the day Blue Care commenced operations until 2005, there were very few data that could have been used to analyse and determine where risks existed in order to put in place risk mitigation interventions. What data was available indicated a high number of at-fault crashes. The move to smaller cars between 2005 and 2006 went some way to reducing the number of crashes, especially reversing crashes (see Figure 1).