

Leading by a sample

WORDS Nick Dalziel/David Dowsey

As far as stigmas go, they don't get much bigger than those surrounding drug testing. We tend to see it as something reserved for hard-living footballers or those pedalling up and down the Pyrenees on SBS.

More and more often, however, Australian workplaces are the main focus of testing for drugs, both illegal and legal.

In the past, many employers who sought to introduce random drug and alcohol testing were met by complaints about invasion of privacy. However, in recent years there has been a renewed focus on the impact of drug and alcohol use on workplace health and safety.

It started slowly, with testing being introduced in just a few workplaces but it has become more common. In the late 1980s, the NSW

State Rail Authority was one of the first workplaces to introduce mandatory drug testing for its employees.

The Australian Defence Force started urine testing for illicit drugs in 2003, while workers in the mining, and road and air transport sectors have been required to undergo random drug tests as a condition of their employment for some time, much of this done from saliva samples.

So where does that leave the rest of us?

All employers in Australia have an obligation to provide a safe working environment for their employees. Every workplace can be dangerous: whether it's the hoist in a mechanic's workshop or the boiling water tap in the *Australian Automotive* office.

Clearly, there are differing degrees of danger, but under the legislation, every employer has the same obligation. Any accident resulting from an employee using, or being under the effects of, illicit drugs in the workplace comes back to the employer. The implementation of an effective drug and alcohol policy is now an important proactive step by employers to meet their obligation to provide a safe working environment.

Considering 11 per cent of workplace injuries, and five per cent of workplace fatalities in Australia are attributable to drug and alcohol misuse, this sort of scenario is not unusual. Employers turning a blind eye are taking a big risk.

Just like with drink driving, insurance will not cover an accident in the workplace, but consequences can be far more serious if that employer is then found to have failed in their duty of care.

Other employees can then sue their employer for failing to provide a safe workplace. Coroners can become involved, and financial and time costs to employers can be enormous.

It doesn't have to be this messy, though. Having, and enforcing, a drug and alcohol policy for the workplace, will not only help fulfil an employer's duty of care, but will also reduce the chances of an incident like this occurring in the first place.

Enforcing is the key word there.

"Companies say that they have a drug and alcohol policy and they get it from the

bound book on the shelf, gathering dust," says Michael Wheeldon, Director of Integrity Sampling. "But unless they're policing that policy in some way, they wouldn't want to be in the coroner's court giving evidence."

Integrity Sampling started saliva drug and alcohol testing in Victorian workplaces in 2002, and quickly expanded throughout Australia. Its main clients are in safety-sensitive fields, such as the transport industry, in which it tests drivers, as well as those working in warehouses.

Nowadays, it conducts over 35,000 tests per year, working within transport warehousing, aviation, marine and mining companies.

The company does a lot more than turn up to a workplace with a test kit and interrupt morning tea. In fact, Integrity Sampling can help a business design a drug and alcohol policy from scratch, and then educate employees about that policy and its enforcement.

"It's all about being fit for work," Wheeldon said, explaining the company's philosophy and its use of saliva testing.

"With saliva, it correlates fairly closely with a blood test, which would indicate that a person might be under the effect of a drug if something positive came to light.

"Urine testing shows a history of drug use - it doesn't necessarily mean that a person is affected by drugs if they give a positive urine test."

Wheeldon and Integrity Sampling have no interest in what people have done in their spare time away from work, so long as this does not affect them during work hours.

The greater convenience and relevance, and reduced invasion of privacy of oral saliva testing are all reasons why Integrity Sampling uses it instead of urine testing.

Not all employees should be tested on the same day, says Wheeldon, as this hurts a business' productivity on the day of drug testing. There's also a need to ensure that the testing is, in fact, random.

"If we do them all at once, the employees will think that it's out of the way for the year and we won't come back.

"So if we go in five or six times a year and do eight tests, instead of doing 40 at once, there's that element of them not knowing when the drug testers are there, so they

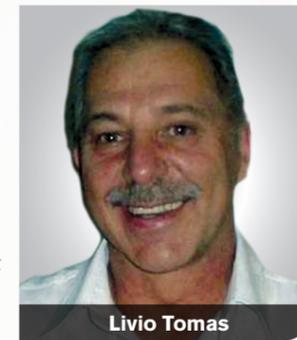
might make the decision to be sober when they go to work," Wheeldon said.

"If you come up positive, it would indicate that you may be under the effects of that drug and you've had it in a short window of time.

"For cannabis, it's eight to 12 hours; other illicit drugs could be anywhere between 24 and 36 hours, but then there are all the factors in relation to the quality and quantity of the drug and people's metabolism," Wheeldon said.

The machine used by Integrity Sampling is completely objective, relying purely on its own technology to give a positive or negative reading. It tests for cannabis, cocaine, opiates, amphetamines and methamphetamine and has 99.6 per cent accuracy.

All presumptive positive tests are sent off to Integrity Sampling's laboratory



Livio Tomas



Michael Wheeldon

for verification, and this result is sent back to the client within 48 hours.

Livio Tomas, the company's Operations Manager, says Integrity Sampling is currently expanding into the automotive industry, after starting in 2013.

VACC and Integrity Sampling have produced a fitness-for-work policy for members. VACC approached Integrity Sampling for help after numerous calls from members concerned about their employees presenting for work affected by drugs or alcohol. Members were frustrated that a disciplinary process was their only option to manage poor performance caused by drug and alcohol use.

So far, progress has been steady, although some employers were reluctant to have drug testers in their workplace.

"I'm well aware, coming from the repair industry myself, that there was reasonable drug use. The biggest fear would be that there aren't enough skilled people out there to replace someone lost," he told *Australian Automotive*.

With the current skills shortage in the automotive industry, many small businesses would be hit hard if they were forced to dismiss an employee due to drug use and may struggle to find a replacement.

Indeed, Tomas admits that the implementation of a drug testing policy may be enough to push out some employees, but the education and 'fit for work' methodology of Integrity Sampling mitigate that.

Drug and alcohol policies don't need to be structured in such a way as to dismiss an employee on the spot if they test positive. Counselling may be offered and a warning given, and the employee may be required to undergo drug tests at another date, possibly in their own time, at their own expense.

Not only is this beneficial to the business, as it doesn't lose a valued staff member, but it may also help an employee who is struggling with a substance addiction and the problems that come with it. Losing their job may be even more harmful to their general wellbeing.

Another disincentive to automotive businesses has been the cost of using Integrity Sampling's services.

"Businesses have no hesitation in spending \$5,000 on putting in a fire cabinet, but they balk at our program, which is a fraction of the cost," Tomas said.

Unlike a fire cabinet, which can only be used in an emergency, a properly enforced drug and alcohol policy offers

day-to-day benefits to a business. Not having employees affected by drugs, even if they aren't causing accidents, improves staff morale.

There's great reassurance in knowing that the person working next to you is actually fit for work, that customers will always be well served, and that apprentices can join a healthy work culture and learn their trade safely.

Members who have implemented the policy have reported acceptance in the workplace. In one case, in a country area, there has been a positive community response to a business taking the step to ensure employees are fit for work under the policy they implemented.

And of course, the insurance aspect of this policy is of great peace of mind to employers. What may seem like a hefty investment pales into insignificance next to the costs of court, compensation and damages.

"If an employee was found to be affected by drugs after a workplace accident, the damage caused, to people or to property, wouldn't be covered by insurance, and they would have to go into cost recovery," Tomas said. 