



Advanced Safety Magazine
Winter 2008
Page 32-34



Drug use kills business

ICE overtakes ecstasy but marijuana is still the most common drug used. *Advanced Safety* gets the nitty-gritty from one of the country's leading drug testing companies.



Too few industries have implemented drug and alcohol testing programmes and this needs to change.

Much of Australia's safety-sensitive industries, such as transport, mining and engineering, have implemented drug-safe programmes.

In Australia (where OHS regulations no longer mandate drug testing in work places), the mining industry is leading the way. It wants to be seen as a worldwide forerunner in OHS issues.

The industry is guided by the Mine Health and Safety Act 2004 which stipulates that mines should introduce a policy or at least address the issue of drugs in the workplace.

But too few other industries have implemented drug and alcohol testing programmes, says Frontline Diagnostics frontman Michael White, "and this needs to change".

His firm has screened for drugs in industries

including construction, aviation, food, manufacturing, theme parks, dock-side cargo handling and cruise ships.

He says most managers are oblivious to drug use and drug impairment at work.

"It's not easy to monitor the presence of drugs at work, yet 70 per cent of drug users in Australia are employed. Organisations need to remember that a reputation for drug use will kill a business just as fast as it will kill a drug user."

For example, when a mine contractor becomes known as drug-sympathetic through a drug screening programme, it is banned from the site and will be not be considered for future tenders. As many mining and other similar industry contractors rely on the regular flow of contracts to survive, a reputation for drug use can kill their business.

"Another example is that of a Sydney-based courier company whose drivers and office staff won a reputation of using and distributing drugs," he recounts. "It was never proved, but the suggestion that it could be true put the business into receivership within a few weeks."

White said that any Drug-Safe Workplace programme should be communicated throughout a company to ensure management staff and unions feel comfortable with its development and implementation. It is also important to choose the appropriate type of testing devices.

One such is the oral or saliva device, which is only suitable where alternative screening options are not appropriate, such as on the roadside. They are inaccurate for the detection of marijuana and can't detect drugs in the



vallium and Serapax family (benzodiazepines) except in extremely large quantities.

In addition, while cannabis affects users for several hours after consumption, oral screening devices have only a short window of detection for marijuana of about two hours. This means the devices are generally useless for identifying anyone who has consumed cannabis earlier, such as the night before.

Another type of screening is with urine, which requires a sample to be taken in a toilet facility. This testing is very quick and accurate and has been the preferred option.

White has experienced first-hand how drug use can be overlooked in the workplace and the damaging consequences.

Prior to setting up Frontline Diagnostics he worked with a business partner in pharmaceutical promotions for 15 years. "We had a great working relationship and I was unaware that he was a heroin addict until he overdosed and passed away after 12 years of using the drug," White said. "It was then that I decided I wanted to work towards creating a drug-safe Australia."

Using his background in pharmaceuticals, he started Frontline in 1999. His purpose was to provide a testing and screening service for companies and to help in policy development to lessen the impact of drug and alcohol use in the workplace.

Frontline tested about 65,000 workers throughout 2007. The percentage of workers testing positive has been fairly similar from one year to another, but the incidence of ICE has increased sharply and overtaken ecstasy. "This being said, marijuana is still the most common drug found in the workplace," White explains.

"From our experience, it is not unusual to find 15 per cent substance abuse in the workplace. The objective of a Drug-Safe Workplace programme is to show the users that they can take control of their own welfare and help workmates to actively eliminate alcohol and other drugs from the workplace."

According to White, drug screening methods are generally the same around the world and Australia is equal to, if not ahead of, the world's best practices. 