

Work Health in the Queensland Construction Industry

Background

The construction industry in Queensland employs approximately 11% of all employed persons in the state. Yet the construction industry workforce suffers from an endemic “unwellness.” Construction is often characterized as a “dirty, dangerous and demanding” industry.

Previous research shows that Australian construction workers work long, non-standard hours, suffer high levels of work-family conflict and experience feelings of job insecurity and stress. These factors are known predictors of poor physical and mental health and unhealthy behaviours (poor diet, insufficient physical exercise, harmful alcohol consumption and diminished sleep quality). The predominantly blue collar, male-dominated workforce creates particular challenges for health promotion.

Centre for Construction Work Health and Safety, RMIT University

Centre members combine research expertise with practical industry experience to provide internationally recognised and industry-relevant research into work health and safety in the construction sector. Our research has been funded by the Australian Research Council, Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner, Engineers Australia and the Cooperative Research Centre for Construction Innovation. Members are also frequently engaged to undertake applied research on behalf of government and industry organisations.

Contacts

Ian Connor

Project Manager, Centre for
Construction Work Health
and Safety

Tel: + 61 3 99250488

Mob: + 614 0409 253 052

Email: ian.connor@rmit.edu.au

Research context

The construction industry in Queensland has been identified as a high-risk industry due to a higher-than-average prevalence of a number of chronic disease risk factors.

When construction workers' health status was compared with the wider Queensland adult population, the results showed:

- Overweight or obese – 66% compared with 55.6%
- Harmful alcohol consumption – 64% compared with 15%
- Smoking – 34% compared with 15.5%
- High blood pressure – 37% compared with 27.5%
- High cholesterol – 17% compared with 28.7%

The high incidence of these risk factors places workers at risk of developing long term chronic diseases and conditions such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancers, sleep disorders, musculoskeletal injuries and psychological illness.

Research aims

The aim of the research project is to provide a contribution to the evidence base around strategies that are effective in improving the health and wellbeing of blue-collar workers of the Queensland construction industry.

The specific aims of the project are to:

1. Develop and rigorously evaluate the effect of specific health promotion strategies at participating projects
2. Identify barriers to and factors which facilitate the implementation and adoption of health-promotion strategies by Australian construction workers
3. Develop recommendations for strategies that can effectively reduce risk factors for chronic disease in the Australian construction industry, and
4. Evaluate the generalizability of an innovative approach to the development, implementation and evaluation of health promotion strategies in construction projects.



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Expected outcomes

Project outcomes will focus on three broad areas:

1. Recommendations as to the level of effectiveness of the health promotion strategies developed, implemented and evaluated during the participatory research process
2. Recommendations for organisations about the implementation strategy to maximize the adoption of health promotion strategies within the construction project context, and
3. Recommendations about a generalizable and robust assessment protocol for developing, implementing and evaluating worker-focused health promotion strategies.

Research methods

The research will be undertaken in three stages.

During the **first stage**, baseline data will be collected from our partner organisation's construction sites. These projects will represent different sectors of the construction industry, e.g. commercial building construction, engineering construction etc.

In the **second stage**, an experimental stage of work will be undertaken in which the health promotion and wellness interventions will be implemented at participating sites. Workers' health-behaviour and wellbeing will be continuously measured during this experiment using a suite of leading performance measures.

In **stage three** of the research, site-based workers will engage in a rigorous qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the impact of the interventions. Results will identify the impact of the intervention, as well as factors that influenced workers' experiences (both positively and negatively).

This information will be critical to improving the design and delivery of health and wellness interventions in the future.

Research participants

The primary target population of the research is blue-collar workers, specifically technicians and trades workers; machinery operators and drivers; and labourers.

Participants will be recruited in consultation with our industry partner, Lend Lease Australia. Lend Lease Australia has nominated three projects at which to conduct the research.

Likely benefits

The likely benefits this research is expected to provide are:

- a greater understanding of the barriers to and factors which facilitate the implementation and adoption of health-promotion strategies
- the development of evidence-informed strategies for improving workers' health and wellbeing, and
- ultimately, the achievement of improved employee health and wellbeing in the construction industry.

Research timeframe

The research is being conducted from November 2013 through to May 2015.

Research team

The research is being conducted by members of the Centre for Construction Work Health and Safety, RMIT University:

Professor Helen Lingard

Tel: + 61 3 99253449

Email: helen.lingard@rmit.edu.au

Dr Michelle Turner

Tel: +61 3 99253478

Email: michelle.turner@rmit.edu.au

Funding organisation

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