

Emerging OHS issues: A futurist's view

"How do we deal with potential change, the variables of the future? And what have you done to mitigate risk...to engage in the future you want to create?" Strategic futurist, Looking Up Feeling Good director and keynote speaker Marcus Barber posed these questions in the context of occupational hygiene in his address at the Aust Institute of Occupational Hygienists (AIOH) conference in Canberra on Dec 6. "We all think our period, our sliver of time on the planet, is the most chaotic the world has ever seen, with more change than we can ever imagine," he said. "Well it's a load of rubbish...we've been worrying about change for millennia. It's always chaotic... everything is in context." Futurists assess what the current context is and what the future might be, he explained, noting to some extent occupational hygienists do a lot of what he does. Change is always dynamic, it's always in context, he said. "It's about the going through some things that have the potential for change." But this isn't a prediction, he stresses. "We futurists deal with the realities of variables of futures." "The idea of what have you done to mitigate risk, not how have you responded to risks emerging, but what you are doing on the forefront to mitigate risk, as opposed to the reactive approach, asking orgs to make smarter decisions now rather than waiting for things to go pear-shaped," he said. Barber identified emerging issues such as the '3rd Place' or offsite workplaces, "the rise of 'Absentosis'", the "unvaccinated", "E-condria" and "the E-besity epidemic", which *OHN* relays.

The '3rd Place' as workplaces

Offsite workplaces, or '3rd Places' were becoming prevalent in Aust, Barber said. The concept extends to mobile workers, such as frequent flyers and car drivers, who have access to fully fitted-out office spaces with catering, meeting rooms and computer access, he said. The push for more mobility allows companies to reduce office rental costs, but brings with it the question of liability, he said. "Who takes responsibility for assessing the health of this off-site workplace? To what extent can the employee and employer be confident this 3rd place of work is not exposing the worker to a biological, chemical, physical or ergonomic hazard?" Barber asked. Moreover, was "there any risk for the employer in taking at face value, the suitability of the employee's home environment for work purposes?" "Does the responsibility finish with providing a suitable desk and chair, or should the biological and chemical factors existing in a home environment, also be considered as requiring an effective assessment?" Barber said "the future potential for this idea is the need for occupational hygienists to conduct an in-home assessment of an employee's place of residence prior to the employer encouraging the employee to work from home."

The rise of 'absentosis'

A concept Barber calls 'absentosis' is an emerging stress factor in the workplace. This is the physical and psychological effect on committed quality workers who try to compensate for workers not pulling their weight, with the latter concept known as "presenteeism", he explains. "Absentosis is more likely to target the dedicated workers trying ever harder to get the work done whilst their fellow disengaged workers are 'absent' from doing any productive work," Barber said. "In an age of down-sizing it is more likely the good workers who remain will be asked to do more with significantly less resources available to them, at the same time as more of the remaining workforce is mentally disengaged from completing the tasks still to be done." Tensions between these two influences present in the workplace may need to be addressed.

'The E-besity epidemic'

Barber raises the concept of "E-besity". He cites some symptoms as a reliance on personal data assistants (PDA); people becoming agitated without technology access; making unexpected U-turns when driving; bit-part conversations with family and friends. There was increased pressure to always be available, he said. This mistakes activity for productivity. "PDAs are to the E-besity sufferers what fridges are to the obese," Barber said. People panic when they've forgotten mobile phones, or are on holiday. "People cannot say no," he said. They don't have "the ability to switch off".

'The unvaccinated'

There has been a jump in the number of parents in "smart countries" choosing not to vaccinate their kids against basic disease, Barber said. This may amount to nothing, but could affect hygiene in workplaces in 10 to 20 years, he said. "How exposed are people to things we think are already handled or eradicated from a health point of view?" he asked.

'E-condria'

The concept of "E-condria" may become an issue. "Who hasn't looked on [the] internet for symptoms, 'I must have something'... we then go armed with facts to doctors telling them why we are so sick," he said.

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