

Education, research and our future

As the Journal of the Safety Institute of Australia it is natural that *Safety In Australia* focuses attention on matters directly related to the OHS Profession and our practise.

Within *Safety In Australia* 27(1) we posed a number of questions about the role of the Profession, professional ethics and the SIA Code of Conduct. This stimulated a healthy volume of debate in the subsequent edition and this has in turn spilled into this edition that has taken education and training as a theme with an emphasis on the education of the OHS practitioner.

In this edition Pam Pryor reports the findings of a survey of tertiary institutions that deliver OHS programs and Dino Pisaniello and Karen Gallie discuss the relative merits of distance education as an evolving approach that makes such programs more accessible to adult learners. David Clancy and Jacqueline Wood offer an insight to the process of delivering OHS training in the workplace. Eric Wigglesworth comments on the article by Pam Pryor in *Safety In Australia* 27(1) and his comments draw the topic of education and training directly into the discussions around the OHS Profession. In the process, Eric poses a highly significant challenge to the Institute.

Eric argues, "The acid test of a profession lies in the extent to which that profession has contributed to the quality of life of the community that it serves." and "...until we have some evidence of the beneficial contribution of the SIA to the Australian working community, that organisation cannot begin to claim professional status." (Wigglesworth 2006) These are strong words and should challenge the thinking of every member of the SIA.

To pass Eric's "acid test" he argues that we must improve our statistical data collection and analysis. I would suggest that we must also address the evaluation of our interventions. "Evaluation" is a word that is freely banded around in the context of interventions and often seems to refer to the extent to which someone has done what they said they would do without necessarily identifying the effectiveness of the process or the outcomes. To demonstrate that we have "contributed to the quality of life of the community that we serve" we need to get better at formal evaluation and the publication of our findings (Cowley 2005). In recent years we have seen excellence guidance ranging from the more esoteric

and perhaps academically orientated *Guide to Evaluating the Effectiveness of Strategies for Preventing Work Injuries: How to Show Whether a Safety Intervention Really Works* (Robson, Shannon et al. 2001), through to the more easily digestible *Evaluating OHS Interventions: A Worksafe Victoria Intervention Evaluation Framework* (LaMontagne and Shaw 2004) and *Guidelines for Evaluation of Safety Programs for the Agricultural Industry* (Sherrard and Day 2001), the latter of which is applicable far beyond the sector that the title suggests is its target.

Before we have interventions to evaluate we must have robust frameworks for designing the interventions themselves; the combination of intervention and evaluation may be captured by the term *intervention research*. However, the very limited funds available within Australia to support the conduct of developmental and empirical research (Wigglesworth 2001b; Wigglesworth 2001a) is making an intervention research evidence base increasingly hard to construct. Contrary to this trend in Australia we can jealously look at what is being done in other countries such as the USA where, at the time of writing, the (NIOSH) NORA research conference is just closing; we can look at the rapidly growing collection of quality research reports available through the HSE web site; and we can look at the research funding policy of WorkSafe British Columbia (see the article by Terry Bogoy on page 17 of this edition of *Safety In Australia*).

Research is increasingly a word that academics find themselves unable to use when dealing with what limited sources of funds remain in Australia. Agencies that are prepared to fund interventions increasingly prescribe the nature of the work which, by default, becomes contract research or consultancy as opposed to researcher-driven research.

In the absence of an evidence base constructed through quality research, the content of robust and contemporaneous education programs for OHS practitioners is threatened. Borger (2005) reports the views of Dino Pisaniello (Department of Public Health, University of Adelaide), Debra Moodie Bains (University of Western Sydney) and Michael Quinlan (University of NSW School of Organisation and Management) and has gone as far as suggesting that poor research funding could eventually relegate OHS to the TAFE and training sector.

Borger (op. cit.) reports the views that the direction of current funding

arrangements under the recently formed Australian Safety and Compensation Council, might lead to "contract, consultancy research that will deliver what the government wants and mass-produced education through specialised training providers – a situation that doesn't bode well for OHS academia."

Academics are expected to generate money for their institutions through research grants and consultancies. The unavailability of such funds will limit the ability of academics to maintain their profile and justify their existence at the university level. Without enough academics with a research history to replace those that move on, the situation is compounded (Borger op. cit.).

Pisaniello has commented (Borger op. cit.) that OHS learning is changing "...away from the view that it is 'all about knowing' to 'am I adding value?'". Surely this is central to Wigglesworth's "acid test" and without academics equipped to provide the frameworks that can be used by students to measure the value they add, is there any hope for us becoming a true profession?

References

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