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Submission to the parliamentary committee inquiry into managing fatigue in transport.

Background

The contribution of fatigue to road accidents has been well described in the reports from the transport industry (ARRB Transport Research Ltd). Contributing factors to fatigue have been identified as lack of sleep, regulation of driving hours, and health problems such as sleep apnoea and obesity. Statistics on the health status of heavy vehicle drivers show a high incidence of obesity, a lack of physical activity and poor eating habits (RTF, 1995).

Strategies for fatigue management in the transport industry have focused on issues associated with the regulation of working hours and improved sleep, and the introduction of a Truck Safety Accreditation. The latter includes driver health as an important strategy for occupational health and safety for the heavy vehicle industry. However the contribution of the timing of meals and the right combination of foods on alertness are not commonly known. Foods do not carry a label indicating their potential effect on alertness. There seems to be a lack of establishments that have suitable food choices readily available the highways, whether for regular long distance drivers or general road users.

The potential contribution of food to driver alertness.

The timing of meals, and the right combination of foods can contribute to improved fatigue management, and driver alertness. A regular intake of carbohydrate rich foods will assist in the prevention of low blood glucose levels, which lead to tiredness and drowsiness. Maintenance of adequate blood sugar levels is necessary for the brain to operate effectively and allow for better concentration. Also there are indications that the consumption of protein rich foods can influence alertness. Overall the consumption of healthy food in a balanced diet will lead to improved health status of drivers.

‘Healthy Eating on the Road’

The ‘Healthy Eating on the Road’ project is an example of how issues related to health awareness, food availability and road safety can be addressed. The long term aim of the project is to reduce the incidence of obesity, cardio-vascular disease and diabetes, through education of heavy vehicle drivers and improved access to healthy food choices in roadhouses along the Hume and Newell Highways. The initiative to develop the project was based on identified needs in the transport industry and has been a collaborative approach.

The objectives of the project are to improve the health, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of heavy vehicle drivers, and to create an environment that supports changes in eating habits, physical activity, and fatigue management. The intervention strategies that have been implemented focused on foodservice programs for roadhouses and an education campaign for heavy vehicle drivers. The results of the evaluation are positive and the drivers indicate actual behaviour changes towards better eating patterns and improved fatigue management. The benefits of a healthier driver workforce are:

- A better quality of life for professional drivers
- A reduction in the health costs to the driver, the transport industry and the community as a whole
- Improved fatigue management within the transport industry as a result of improvements in heavy vehicle driver health status
- Improved safety on the roads for all.

The implementation of the project on a larger scale has the potential to contribute to road safety through improved health and improved fatigue management for all road users. Strategies to achieve wider implementation are currently being explored, however at this stage the future direction of the project lay with the transport industry. There has been widespread interest in the driver education booklet developed for the project and requests for information and participation are coming from transport companies, Road and Transport Authority, Health Services and interested individuals across Australia. The project has the potential to improve road safety as well as the general health of Australians. The principles of the education strategies and the establishment of improved access to healthier food choices can also be applied to air, sea and rail transport.

References:

ARRB Transport Research Ltd , Road Safety Profile RTA South Western region
1993-1997
Road and Transport Forum, ‘Industry Accreditation Health Research Project’, November
1995

Marjo Roshier-Taks, on behalf of ‘Healthy Eating on the Road’