



WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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13 October 2011

Mr Tony Windsor
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Regional Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Mr Windsor

RE: PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO FIFO

On behalf of the Australian Medical Association (WA) I would like to congratulate the Standing Committee on Regional Australia for identifying the need for a full Parliamentary inquiry into the issue of Fly-in, Fly Out and Drive-In, Drive-Out practices and their impact on regional Australia.

FIFO has progressively become an important way of organising business and employment in Australia – especially in my own state of Western Australia.

This is not a passing phase of life or business. I fully expect it to become an even more important business tool in the future as a number of huge gas, oil and mineral developments currently on the drawing board for WA's North-West move from the planning to the construction phase.

Historically, every economic boom has had a significant flow-on impact in a range of areas. Our current boom is no different. However the number of FIFO/DIDO workers means that the impacts are likely to affect more individuals, families and communities than ever before.

As you will see from the attached AMA (WA) Press Release issued on 26 August, 2011, we believe that while timely and appropriate, the Inquiry should as a matter of importance examine issues surrounding the health.

As we indicated in this press release there have been a number of recent reports that demonstrate significant health concerns around FIFO workers, ranging from diabetes, obesity, mental health and heart disease. A number of experts have also indicated concerns about the disrupting nature of FIFO employment, an impact demonstrated by an increased use of alcohol and illegal drugs such as Kronic.

I have made a number of statements recently about the issue of infectious diseases and FIFO workers and problems created by their regular travel from home/work/holidays and the possibility of carrying and transferring such diseases.

We also understand that the FIFO lifestyle and the strains imposed on workers sometimes have a negative impact on personal and family relationships.

The AMA(WA) believes these are all issues that any inquiry into FIFO needs to examine.

In order to assist the Inquiry, the AMA(WA) is currently conducting a survey of medical professionals who are operating specifically in FIFO communities, asking them about the health impacts of FIFO, both on the FIFO community as well as wider implications for their own practices and communities that serve mining operations.

We would envisage having this survey ready to supply to you when you visit WA, hopefully to discuss these issues on a wider basis and to meet some of the medical professionals involved.

There are a number of General Practitioners and other medical professionals who derive a great deal of professional and personal satisfaction from working in isolated areas of WA, providing health services to mining operations. However the services they provide are often made difficult by extremely high costs in running their practices.

In some cases it is unlikely that they will be able to continue working in isolated areas without special financial consideration.

Following the issuing of the press release referred to above, the AMA (WA) was contacted by members wanting to ensure that your Inquiry understood the impact of FIFO on remote communities, especially the impact on the long-term viability of their practices in the face of extremely high rents and the difficulties of attracting and retaining staff.

At this point of the Inquiry, the AMA(WA) would like to make a number of comments:

- There is a noticeable dearth of solid research and statistical evidence of the full impact of FIFO on health, on communities and on small businesses. We recommend that the Inquiry should call on this to be investigated as a matter of importance.
- The Inquiry must pay special attention to the impact of FIFO on health issues.
- The Inquiry must, as a matter of course, visit local communities in WA to investigate and hear the full impact of FIFO not just on the workers themselves but on wider community life, and general practitioners.

We have already received a number of comments from medical professionals conducting business in remote communities, raising concern about the long-term viability of their practices in the face of extremely high rents, difficulties of attracting and retaining staff.

We believe it is appropriate that the Inquiry examine, as matter of urgency, the possible need for a supplementary payment to practices who are attempting to continue to provide a service in remote areas in the face of extremely high expenses.

The AMA (WA) sincerely hopes that the decision to establish an Inquiry will be the start of a positive debate on the current importance of FIFO for the Australian economy, the impact of FIFO on our society and families, and the impact of FIFO on the health of employees.

We also hope that your recommendations will assist in ensuring that any negative impact of FIFO are considered and, if possible, moves taken to rectify them.

We believe that your Committee can take a strong leadership role in ensuring that the inevitable growth of FIFO as a business tool has a positive and not a negative impact.

Finally, I would like to mention that the AMA (WA) magazine, *Medicus*, published a contribution by a member last month that looked expressively at these issues.

In this article, written by a District Medical Officer at Hedland Health Campus, Dr Janet McEwan, it was suggested that an information campaign be organised to ensure that FIFO workers are aware of a range of health issues.

“This should have a major impact on helping to create a healthy, happy and sustainable workforce. After all it is the very same patients that are assisting us to keep our while economy booming – lest we not forget them,” Dr McEwan writes.

I have attached a copy of Dr McEwan’s article to this letter.

I expect to be able to write to you further in the near future to pass on the results of the AMA(WA) survey of medical professionals who have involvement in FIFO health and communities that have been impacted by FIFO.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me or the AMA(WA) office for assistance in looking further at FIFO and health related issues.

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor David Mountain
AMA (WA) President

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