



ROUTINE HEARING TESTS FOR MINING EMPLOYEES

Resources Safety Division of the Western Australian Department of Mines and Petroleum has been running a health surveillance programme since 1996. As part of this programme, audiometric tests for each mining employee are done at commencement of employment and then every five years subsequently.

Resources Safety regulates the Mines Safety and Inspection Act, 1994, and associated Mines Safety and Inspection Regulations, 1995. Essentially this legislation is based on national occupational health and safety legislation, with a specific focus on the WA resources industry. The regulations outline specific requirements to manage noise and monitor its effects through regular hearing tests.

To 30 June 2009, approximately 160,627 people had been tested at least once, 39,536 had two tests, and 11,055 had three tests with only 18 people having had four hearing tests. Trained audiometric officers, in compliance with WorkCover WA requirements, do audiometric tests. From May 2006 onwards, all hearing tests undertaken for the Resources Safety health surveillance programme were also entered into the WorkCover WA database. This was not consistently the case, for the first ten years.

After recent analysis of the audiometric data, Resources Safety's focus is to identify early changes to use them to trigger changes in noise exposure and behaviours associated with hearing conservation. The Australian Standard AS1269.4 provides a complicated set of criteria to use as trigger levels to instigate a review of hearing conservation methods. To invite a more proactive application of these routine hearing tests, Resources Safety has recently promoted the use of the US OSHA criteria to calculate the arithmetic mean of hearing threshold levels at 2, 3 and 4 kHz for both ears, separately. This can be used as an indicator of poor hearing conservation if the score is more than 25dB from audiometric zero (the standard minimum of the test), in either ear. For subsequent tests, if the difference between either ear is more than 10dB, this should be considered as a significant change and should further trigger a complete review of both occupational and non-occupational noise exposures.

The Data Working Group of the National Mine Safety Framework (NMSF) has not yet discussed timelines for the introduction of significant or standard hearing threshold shifts or compensable cases of hearing loss. However it is feasible for this to be reported as an accident/incident. The concept has been introduced at the occasional meeting of the NMSF Working Group as a health incident to be considered sometime in the future.

More information can be provided upon request from Lindy Nield (Occupational Health Manager) or Mike Rowe (Director Health Management Branch).

Contact details: Lindy.Nield@dmp.wa.gov.au or Mike.Rowe@dmp.wa.gov.au
Phone: 08 9358 8088 Phone: 08 9358 8091