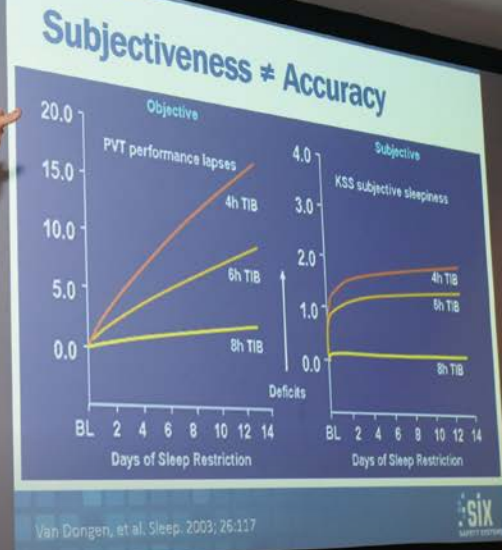


Mike Harnett speaking at the first-ever WorkSafeBC Fatigue Risk Management Symposium.



# The high price of too little sleep

By Sarah Ripplinger

Fatigue is more than just a bad night's sleep. Being in a chronic state of tiredness has adverse health effects from slow response times to increased vulnerability to disease. Employers can reduce the harm by creating a fatigue risk-management system.

Getting enough sleep is essential for our health, but it's often easy to believe we can overcome fatigue with another cup of coffee or a splash of cold water to the face. In reality, the rise of digital technology and 24/7 workplaces is changing the way we work, and making it easier to work at any time of the day.

This comes with business benefits in terms of workplace productivity, flexible work schedules, and meeting growing consumer needs. But the flip side is that, according to a sleep review from Dalhousie University, only 26 percent of Canadians get a minimum seven hours of sleep per night. And an estimated 40 to 50 percent of workers are fatigued at work.

"Globally, fatigue has been identified as a contributory factor in many serious and fatal incidents spanning decades. It is having real impacts on workplace health and safety," says Heather Kahle, a human factors

specialist and ergonomist at WorkSafeBC. "Fatigue decreases one's ability to perceive and process important information necessary for safety. It may also decrease one's ability to adequately respond to workplace hazards."

More than feeling drowsy or sleepy, fatigue is an acute or chronic state of tiredness. Disruptions to our body's natural circadian rhythms — which affect our sleeping and waking cycles — from such things as shift work, long shifts, and back-to-back shifts increase the risk of workplace fatigue. If left unchecked, fatigue can contribute to long-term health effects, such as a vulnerability to certain types of cancers, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease.

## Putting workplace fatigue to bed

WorkSafeBC held its inaugural Fatigue Risk Management Symposium on June 7, 2018, to raise awareness of the risks associated with fatigue in the workplace and the importance of addressing them. Nearly 200 professionals from a variety of industries heard from five leading experts on fatigue-related risk in the workplace. Presentations and discussions covered topics ranging from fatigue risk management to circadian rhythms and how fatigue influences workplace performance.

Presenter Mike Harnett, president of Solaris Fatigue Management, emphasized why it's important for employers to take an active role in preventing fatigue. She notes that fatigue in the workplace only became part of the broader risk assessment dialogue for employers in the past three to four years, largely due to increased reporting on scientific findings that show fatigue impairment is real.

Before that, fatigue was often seen as an issue for workers, not employers. Fatigue risk management is a shared responsibility. "We cannot continue to blame the worker and classify the cause of incidents as 'human error.'"

The challenge now, Harnett says, is to continue to raise the profile of fatigue as a risk-management priority.

"Management needs to see fatigue as a business issue and collect metrics to drive informed decision making," says Harnett. "Only through the collection of objective data can management set targets that support KPIs [key performance indicators]. As we often say in the safety world: What gets managed, gets done."

## Managing fatigue from the top down

A fatigue risk-management system (FRMS) is a highly useful framework employers can use to proactively identify and evaluate hazards and risks that may result in harm or adverse outcomes. Critical to this undertaking is establishing an integrated, consistent,

and trustworthy system-wide approach to identify, assess, and control for the risks that can escalate in the presence of fatigue. Transparent reporting and evaluation policies are also essential ingredients of a successful FRMS.

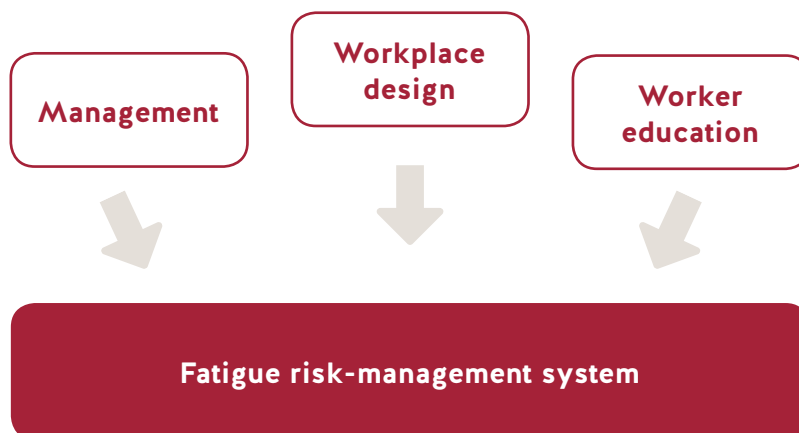
"With fatigue recognized as a key contributory factor in workplace health and safety, FRMS is a solid framework used worldwide to measure, mitigate, and manage the risk of fatigue," says Kahle. "It can be used to set priorities and establish baseline data to evaluate fatigue management strategies over time to ensure that targets are being met and the appropriate interventions are being used.

"Employers will have fatigued workers in the workplace at some point. It's important to ask yourself if hazards in the workplace increase the risk of harm or could lead to adverse safety outcomes when workers are fatigued," adds Kahle. "When workers miss changes or important information in their environment because of fatigue, it affects everything we do in the workplace. Addressing this can save businesses countless dollars due to injury and lost productivity."

## For more information

To assess the level of your daytime sleepiness, check out the Epworth Sleepiness Scale, which is easily searchable online. Have a question about fatigue in your workplace? Contact WorkSafeBC at [humanfactors@worksafebc.com](mailto:humanfactors@worksafebc.com). ☺

## Three areas of focus to effectively manage fatigue in the workplace



**Management:** Schedule workers with fatigue management in mind. Be aware of scheduling and job duties that can lead to fatigue.

**Workplace design:** Ensure that your workplace has good ergonomics that can help reduce fatigue, and fail-safes in case fatigue is present.

**Worker education:** Provide workers with education and resources.