



Depression the dark side of the mining boom

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WESTERN Australia's Pilbara is no place for weakness. Every day, plane-loads of workers are flown in to grind out long shifts on the region's mines, amid the searing heat and red dust, for weeks at a time. It's a macho culture, where you are expected to work hard, play harder and earn big money.

But news earlier this year that one of them had lain dead in his donga, a portable accommodation hut, unnoticed and apparently unmissed, for up to two weeks at a work camp for Woodside's \$14 billion Pluto liquefied natural gas project disturbed many.

"I hate to think that he had a stroke on the Tuesday and died on the Friday and he didn't get the help he needed," says Steve McCartney, the WA secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, who spent many years in the Pilbara.

The loneliness of the 55-year-old's death, which is still before a coroner, highlighted just how isolated life in these mining camps can be for the thousands of fly-in, fly-out workers who are paid handsomely to stoke the engine room of the Australian economy around the clock. It's just one of the factors social workers believe is contributing to a dark social consequence of the resources boom: depression, anxiety and even suicide among mine workers. Unions and companies are united in their concern over this side of the WA mining boom, which is just finding its second wind, with billions of dollars of investment and thousands of workers to flow into projects over the next few years.

OzHelp, a suicide prevention group funded by the federal government to run programs in the Pilbara, estimates suicide rates among mining and construction workers to be up to 70 per cent higher than the national average. OzHelp points to a male-dominated culture, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, and a low emotional capacity to work through problems as key reasons why these workers are at risk. Add to this the social dynamics of life in a mining camp, where hundreds of workers live side-by-side in identical dongas and work 12-hour shifts away from family and friends for weeks at a time, and you begin to understand how mental health problems can develop.

Talk to anyone who has worked in the Pilbara and they have a story about a FIFO worker whose relationship has broken down, is depressed or who finds it hard to cope with not being able to say goodnight to his kids. Many will also, quietly, acknowledge a problem with suicide; they haven't seen any statistics, but they have heard stories.

According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, the national suicide rate in 2008 for men was 16 deaths per 100,000, while for women it was about five per 100,000. OzHelp uses data collected by the Construction and Building Industry Super fund, which shows that up to 172 of its 36,499 WA members committed suicide between 1998 and 2003, a rate of 79 per 100,000 compared to the average for fund members of 43 per 100,000.

Anecdotally, McCartney also believes, from his discussions with members and investigations into workplace deaths, that suicide rates have risen in recent years.



The problems also trouble the top end of town, where Rio Tinto's head of iron ore, Sam Walsh, openly discusses his concern about the suicide risk among his workers, mentioning two incidents in 2009. He also sits on the WA Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention. His right-hand man and new president of Rio's Pilbara iron-ore operations, Greg Lilleyman, can recall at least two attempted suicides by employees in the past year.

As it gears up for an expansion of its Pilbara operations which will involve around 8000 FIFOs, Rio Tinto Iron Ore is focusing on fatigue, with its negative effects on mental health, and changing the culture of the mining camps as part of its mental health strategy.

For example, it is investigating driverless trucks (the company says vehicle accidents are its biggest workplace safety problem, with fatigue playing a big role) and has overhauled its complex roster of Pilbara flights to try to ensure workers aren't exhausted before they catch a plane from Perth.

Many FIFOs fly to Perth from other states, or drive from homes in regional coastal towns such as Mandurah; if you add up this commute to check in for an early morning flight, plus a three-hour trip to Karratha, then a 12-hour shift, it makes for a very long day. Accommodation pressures in the Pilbara, especially in the service towns of Karratha and Port Hedland, have seen some workers having to undertake a double FIFO. Last year some FIFO workers were based in Port Hedland but were forced to take a daily 90-minute flight to work a 9 1/2 hour shift in Karratha, then fly back home to Port Hedland.

Lilleyman is no stranger to the FIFO lifestyle, having worked away from his family between 1997 and 2001, and acknowledges it's a tough gig, especially when your children are young.

"It's very difficult to maintain a relationship with your kids over the phone," he says. But he says the lifestyle also has its advantages, such as having a long block of time at home with the family during the off-weeks, as well as financial and career opportunities. McCartney, who also worked as a FIFO in the Pilbara, says the experience helped his family financially but that now, aged 60, he regrets missing so much of his kids' childhood. "It tears at me," he says.

There are plenty of stories of FIFOs who do handle the experience well, usually those with a clear idea of what they want to achieve and people to support them in these goals. Others are often unprepared for the consequences of earning a lot of money and separation from loved ones.

"When you spend lots of time away, that absence begins to deteriorate the marriage. It causes relationship breakdown, tensions, and affairs can develop," OzHelp chief executive Brenton Tainsh says. "So everything that they've been working for can just fall apart. That causes an almost instantaneous suicide in people's minds because they think, 'there's no point me going on because that's what we're working for'." Groups such as OzHelp, as well as unions and companies, agree it's imperative to change the culture of the FIFO industries.

On the personal level, McCartney says his union wants men to stop being so macho about mental health and begin to talk about their problems. "The problem with anxiety and depression is when you stop work and are by yourself in your room," says McCartney. "You start thinking and it gets worse, which affects your fatigue."



At a broader level, everyone is working towards making the camps become more like a normal community, where you can play sport and be involved in regular activities, instead of just drinking in the wet mess after work.

Those who were FIFOs during the fledgling years of the Pilbara would think today's workers are molly-coddled. FIFOs are hardly forced to take the jobs that offer a salary of up to \$150,000, with meals, serviced accommodation and entertainment thrown in. They certainly get no sympathy from many in the Pilbara community, who see them as highly paid whingers who live in luxurious camps with swimming pools, tennis courts and Foxtel, and don't contribute to the local community.

Whatever your opinion, these local attitudes are a good example of the macho culture of the Pilbara and the social isolation of many FIFO workers, who seem to live between two worlds.