

Education and compulsory testing is the answer to alcohol abuse in mines

By Rhys Evans, Director of ALCO-Safe

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It is a well-known fact that South Africa has one of the largest mining industries. With an economy that was built on diamond and gold mining, South Africa accounts for a significant proportion of world's production and reserves. However, it is also one of the most dangerous working environments and features many risks to its workforce. It is therefore essential to ensure each and every person that enters the mine undergoes a compulsory test for alcohol and is randomly tested for drug consumption. The flipside is an increase in accidents, often fatal ones.

The health risks in most professions are obvious, however, couple the health risks in a mining environment with abuse of substances such as drugs and alcohol and one begins to see how all that glitters is certainly not gold. The percentage of risky drinking among workforces such as the mining industry has been estimated at 25% in studies done by the South African Health and Safety Regulation Forum.

The typical environment of a mine is already classified as one of the world's most dangerous places to work. There are factors such as dust, heat, poor oxygen levels and poor lighting. In addition, miners work underground at depths of many kilometres, making the environment risky even without alcohol consumption. Alcohol is proven to limit concentration, increase aggression and limit one's decision making abilities. An employee working under the influence is more likely to forget safety protocols as well as have a poor reaction time to incidents. It is a sure win for disaster.

However, the effects of alcohol on the body can further place miners at risk including an increased heart rate, dehydration, impaired vision and reason as well as reduced motor neuron control. A study by an independent health and safety regulator at a copper mine in Zambia highlighted that blood alcohol was positive in 30% of accident cases. This

impacts the overall production of the business, as alcohol abuse affects a person's immune system and in turn, creating fertile ground for illness. Illness results in absenteeism and that impacts the company financially. The dangers are not just in accidents happening but also in productivity.

Alcohol related incidents in mines can be attributed to a lack of education on Alcohol and Substance abuse. Drug dealers have moved out of the city and into the smaller areas where the repercussions of drug and alcohol abuse is not widely known nor recognised. People do not understand the impact that alcohol has on their bodies or performance. It is merely regarded as a norm, part of daily life. Furthermore, addiction is a foreign concept. We need more miners that have overcome their addiction and are in recovery to speak out to their colleagues about the consequences of addiction and how rehabilitation can help. This would help to reduce alcohol related incidents through anecdotal experiences and education.

Employers also need to change their policies and procedures with regards to their testing of employees. Random testing should be eradicated and compulsory testing should be introduced. Compulsory testing must be conducted when entering and leaving the mine in order to completely remove any possibilities of an intoxicated person entering the premises. Addicts also consume alcohol and drugs once they are in their work environment and use the tact of staying 'sober' on entry in order to circumvent the system.

It is also vital for employers to educate employees on the importance of reporting a fellow worker who is showing signs that could ultimately result in an incident. Employees often do not raise red flags against one another as they do not want to be seen as 'traitors' so they will keep quiet and let it go. They do not realise that they may be affected in a negative manner by a person that is intoxicated working alongside them. They may even be killed in an accident caused by that person. It really boils down to education and testing. There are modern mines who have an anonymous SMS 'line' that employees can use in order to report unusual and suspicious behaviour. This has proved to be very successful in these places.

New occupation, health and safety rules state that should an incident happen, if the employer is found to be negligent in providing a safe working environment, they will be liable to large fines and even temporary shut downs- once again effecting the bottom line. The only remedy to these situations is through education and alcohol and drug testing.