

MEDIA RELEASE

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Saliva-only drug tests to greatly increase mine safety risks

Safe Work Australia and the National Mine Safety Framework (NMSF) must abandon proposals that would impede mining employers from administering the onsite drug and alcohol tests that best suit their enterprises, resource industry employer group AMMA has said.

With the National Mining Regulations currently being finalised, AMMA has previously raised its concerns about proposed limitations on drug and alcohol testing procedures under the soon-to-be harmonised OHS regulations for onshore mining operators.

The regulatory model developed under the auspices of Safe Work Australia and the NMSF would require majority consent from a workforce before an employer could implement a drug and alcohol testing system based on anything other than saliva.

"If the regulations go ahead as proposed, mining employers would have no provision for onsite urine or breath testing without the support of workers and unions. This would be a retrograde step in ensuring safety on mine sites," said Geoff Bull, AMMA director of workplace policy.

"AMMA has commissioned expert pharmacological research that shows saliva testing is far inferior to urine testing, seriously undermining an employer's capacity for detection in order to best manage their duties under OHS laws.

"We fear this will exponentially increase the risk of employees being drug and alcohol-impaired at work, posing a serious safety risk to themselves and others."

The research into the efficacy of saliva testing vs urine testing also revealed that only urine tests can reliably detect extreme 'hangover effects' of drugs; oral fluid tests are far more likely to produce false negatives; and saliva testing is more vulnerable to 'masking' techniques to prevent detection.

"In order to fulfil their onerous obligations under current and future OHS laws, employers must be able to manage the risks associated with drug and alcohol use on their worksites in the most optimal way," Mr Bull said.

"No default drug and alcohol testing system should apply in the event that an employer cannot get majority support from its workforce, particularly not one confined to the inferior saliva testing method.

"AMMA supports a requirement to consult with workers before implementing a drug and alcohol testing policy but maintains that majority support is almost impossible to obtain given the current union push towards saliva testing.

"We urge Safe Work Australia, the NMSF and other stakeholders including state governments, to immediately reconsider these proposals that would jeopardise mine safety across the country."

The AMMA-commissioned research by Prof MacDonald Christie and Dr John Lewis is available here: http://www.amma.org.au/home/publications/20111216_Research_report_on_saliva_testing.pdf

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