

WELLNESS AND WORK



► JOHN LANG

THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR: POOR HEALTH EQUALS POOR PRODUCTIVITY. IT'S TIME FOR CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION.

It's easy to accept the premise that health and productivity are linked. It's intuitive. Eat well, sleep well, keep fit, wake with boundless energy ready to take the challenges of the day head on ... and win. Who could argue?

The good news is that a growing body of research on the topic vindicates our position regarding health and productivity. The bad news is that Australians are eating worse, getting fatter, getting less sleep and feeling more fatigued than ever before, and the impact on individual and corporate productivity is huge.

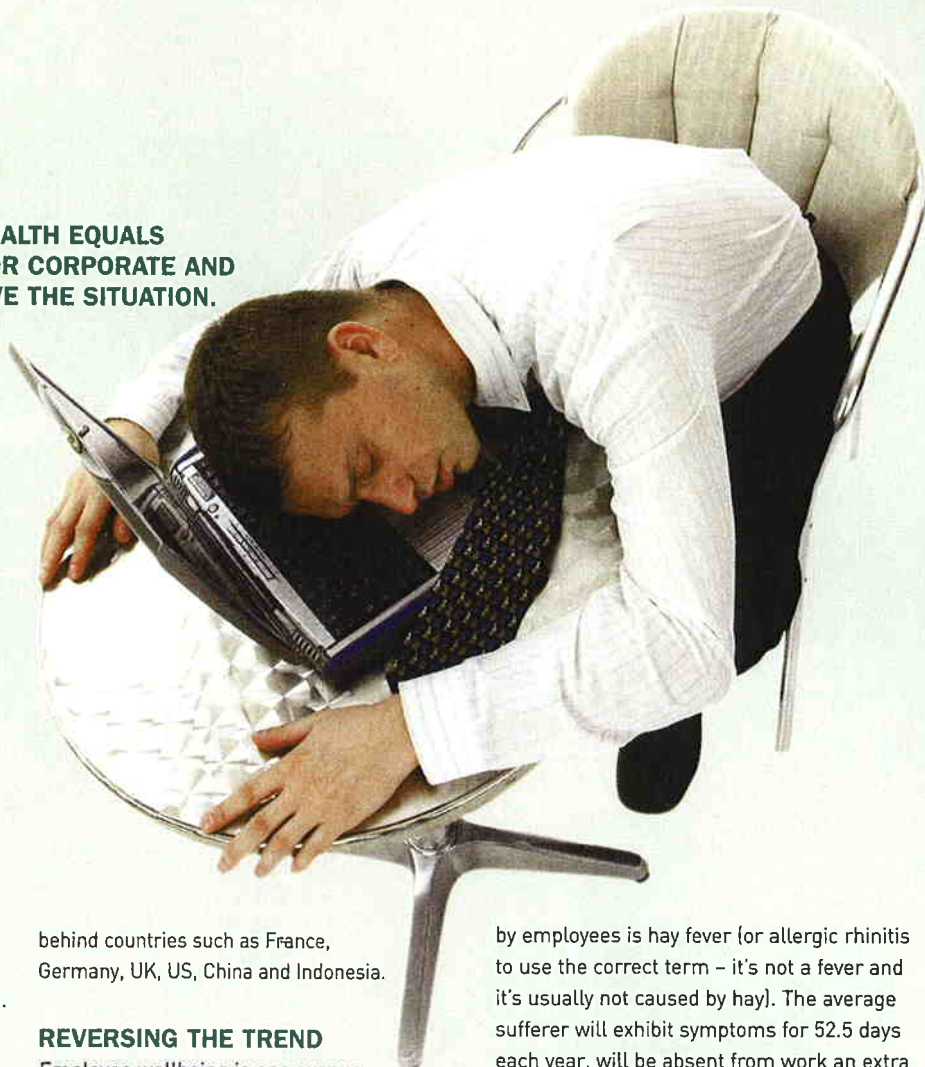
A recent study conducted in November 2005 by Medibank Private showed that the average number of productive work hours contributed by a full time employee in the lowest strata for health and wellbeing (HWB) was 49 hours per month, compared to 140 hours for those in the top 50 percent for HWB. These same people rated their own performance at 37 percent versus 85 percent for the healthy specimens. Unhealthy people know that they are unproductive!

And when it comes to absence, the least healthy average 18 days per year whilst the healthy average only one or two days per year.

HEAD IN SAND SYNDROME

The cost of ill-health to the Australian business community is staggering, and most organisations do nothing about it!

It is interesting to note that senior executives in Australia continue to believe employee productivity is improving. According to a recent study promoted by MP Malcolm Turnbull (Federal Member for Wentworth, NSW) and ACTU President Sharan Burrow, the reality is that the percentage of unproductive time in Australian workplaces has increased from 25 percent in 2003 to 39 percent in 2005, well



behind countries such as France, Germany, UK, US, China and Indonesia.

REVERSING THE TREND

Employee wellbeing is one avenue through which productivity gains can be achieved, and the ROI data is positive, with returns calculated at three to five times the investment for many programs.

The programs of the future won't just target the basic 'eat well, keep fit and don't smoke' messages which have dominated the market for three decades; they will also target psycho-social determinants of poor productivity and help employees to manage chronic (and sometimes not so chronic) conditions which impair productivity – common conditions such as headaches, hangovers and hay fever.

The amount of research now linking health to absence and productivity allows us to 'drill down' to a level of detail that was not previously possible. For instance, we now know the most common 'condition' suffered

by employees is hay fever (or allergic rhinitis to use the correct term – it's not a fever and it's usually not caused by hay). The average sufferer will exhibit symptoms for 52.5 days each year, will be absent from work an extra 3.6 days each year, and will lose 2.3 hours per day of productivity on the days that they do attend work while suffering symptoms. All up, the cost of lost productivity and absence due to allergic rhinitis is \$791 per employee per annum. Similar calculations put the cost of high stress at \$690 per annum, migraine at \$369, depression \$364 and arthritis at \$359.

Poor health is costly to business, and if you're in a senior management position, the costs are amplified because you will not manage others as effectively – their performance suffers as a consequence of your ill health (In the productivity study referred to earlier, the greatest driver of lost productivity, after poor internal communication, was poor management and inefficient planning). In our business, we perform around 6000 executive health

assessments per annum, and our data on executive health shows similar trends to the national norms – Australians are gaining weight (make that fat!) at a rate of a gram per day, and have done every day for the past 20 years! It's a slow insidious creep, but over time the results are incontrovertible.

THE ACTION PLAN

So what can be done? All the tried and proven lifestyle guides still hold sway – eat well, keep fit, manage stress, don't smoke and get a decent night's sleep. Yet on the whole, most Australians fail dismally to do these basic things.

Consider these facts:

- over half the population is overweight or obese
- 54 percent don't exercise enough
- 52 percent have high cholesterol
- 30 percent have high blood pressure

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- one in five smoke
 - one in six have high levels of stress/anxiety.
- Longer work hours, greater commuting time and more dual income families also mean that sleep time is being eroded, leading to chronic tiredness and fatigue for many Australians (37 percent of adult Australians get less than seven hours per night). Those getting less than six hours of sleep per night have double the mortality rate of 'normal' sleepers and are twice as likely to become diabetic because lack of sleep lowers insulin sensitivity.

ON THE SLEEP FRONT

A few tips for a good night's sleep:

1. Have a pre-bed routine. Try to replicate the same routine each night – that will

'condition' you to sleep (remember Pavlov's dog and operant conditioning?).

2. Don't clock watch – in fact, don't even have a clock where you can see it.
3. Perfect a relaxation strategy. Deep breathing, guided imagery, thought switching, visualisation and progressive relaxation are great examples of ways we can 'switch off' the brain. The most common reason people give for not being able to get to sleep, or not being able to get back to sleep if they wake, is "intrusive thoughts". A relaxation technique/strategy will help to overcome this common problem.
4. Blackout/noiseout. If the morning sun, traffic noise, chirping birds or your partner wake you up before you're ready, you might need to do a bit of environmental re-engineering. Some of the best sleep you can get is the last 30-40 minutes before you wake up. If you plan to get up

at 6am, try not to wake up at 5.30am and drift in and out of semi-consciousness for the next half hour.

WHAT ABOUT DIET AND EXERCISE?

What does it mean to eat well and keep fit? The sands keep shifting on these issues, particularly in relation to diet and nutrition. With Atkins devotees going toe to toe (or waistline to waistline) with the CSIRO, Fit for Life, Liver Cleansing and Mediterranean diets, there's little wonder we're confused. But a recent study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* sheds some light on this issue.

Whether we go for high protein, high carb or high fat diets, it is the GI that is most

important from a health perspective. GI stands for Glycemic Index – a measure of how much a particular food will raise blood glucose levels. The high carb, low GI diet came up trumps, which means a diet based on foods such as legumes, pasta, vegetables (except potatoes), sushi and basmati rice (but not jasmine), and some wholegrain (but not wholemeal) breads. Low GI food elevates your blood glucose a little, but for a long time (two to three hours). High GI food provides the quick fix, but also the quick slump. So your productivity during those difficult pre-lunch and mid afternoon sessions can be aided by low GI meals/snacks.

As for activity, try for a minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity (run, swim, ride, row, brisk walk etc.). That's about 1.5 percent of the 10,000 minutes you have each week, so don't use time as an excuse!

A FINAL WORD

There's one other very important factor to consider from a productivity perspective. Even a vegetarian marathon runner will struggle for long term productivity if they are in a job they dislike or find boring. So job fit is extremely important. You may not feel inclined to toss in the towel and search for a more fulfilling job, but good recruitment and selection policies which get the right people into the right positions will provide a solid foundation for a highly productive team in the future. **NA**

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