

A comprehensive alcohol and drug testing policy in the workplace as an intervention in the mining sector

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Abstract

The abuse of alcohol and drugs can negatively affect the workplace. The testing of workers for substances is a sensitive, yet effective intervention to minimise the percentage of workers who test positively for substance abuse. Little research has been conducted to assess the impact of alcohol and drug testing on the workplace. Thus, this qualitative study, carried out in the mining industry in Namibia, investigates how a comprehensive workplace policy on alcohol and drug abuse can reduce substance abuse among workers during working hours. Data was gathered by means of six focus group discussions and 16 in-depth interviews, incorporating workers from all job grades, as well as community members in a closed mining town. The findings show that the comprehensive alcohol and drug testing policy had a positive impact on reducing the occurrence of substance abuse in the workplace. Since the introduction of both random drug and alcohol tests and fit-for-work testing, fewer workers were testing positively for the presence of substances, and participants noted how workers restricted their substance use specifically because of the testing. A central feature of this particular alcohol and drug testing policy is its provision of substance abuse treatment to workers who tested positively for the presence of substances and the involvement of a social worker hired by the mine, rather than simply a punitive approach. However, findings also show that treatment programs need to be followed up with standard aftercare procedures, such as support groups and training on policies and procedures around alcohol and drug testing, in order to improve worker perceptions and acceptance of policies. Furthermore, prevention efforts were regarded as more cost-effective and proactive than the treatment of substance abuse, and holistic substance abuse training was seen as improving awareness among workers.

Introduction

Alcohol and drug abuse are among the most significant health concerns that face Na-

* This paper is dedicated to **Maretha Maree** – she was a teacher/lecturer, mentor and colleague. Maretha was a lecturer in the Department of Social Work for almost 30 years until her death in November 2013. Over all the years at UNAM, she taught many courses amongst others community work, palliative care, and social work management. The late Maretha will also be remembered for her expertise in substance abuse in Namibia, as chairperson of Namibia's Drug Awareness Group, she was instrumental in the facilitation and establishment of the **Teenagers Against Drug Abuse (TADA)** groups through Namibia. This paper is also amongst the many scientific contributions made by the late Maretha Maree towards substance abuse in Namibia.

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mibia today. According to the nationwide KAP Baseline Survey on Alcohol and Drug Use and Abuse in Namibia (2002), 55% of Namibians consume a significant amount of alcohol over the weekends, 2.6 % use marijuana (“dagga”), and 0.4 % use Mandrax (“Quaaludes”). Furthermore, the nationwide survey by the Social Impact Assessment and Policy Analysis (SIAPAC) (2002) indicated that Namibians consume commercial drinks such as beer, whisky and wine as well as traditional homebrews. Traditional homebrews are cheap, and are consumed by lower income groups. Alcohol can be purchased at groceries stores, and at licensed shebeens, as well as unlicensed liquor outlets that operate twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week, in Namibia.

Previous studies in other countries have found that alcohol use tends to be high among mineworkers. In South Africa, the prevalence of risky drinking among mineworkers was found to be 32%, and the majority of these employees were in unskilled or semiskilled positions (Pick, et al., 2003). In a study that was done among mineworkers in Argentina, 34 % were found to be weekly alcohol drinkers (Pick, et al., 2003). Remote mining communities worldwide, including those in Canada (Brubacher & Associates, 2002), Australia (Knowles, Binns & Blaze-Temple, 1988) and South Africa (Pick, et al., 2003; Michalowski, Wicht, & Moller, 1989) have all been found to have high prevalence rates of alcohol in their communities.

Recognising the high rates of alcohol and drug use among Namibians nationally, and its potential effects on the workforce, a company from the mining industry in Namibia initiated a comprehensive alcohol and drug testing policy as intervention.

While alcohol and drug testing have become increasingly common over the past several decades worldwide, few studies have been carried out on the effectiveness of workplace drug testing. French, Roebuck & Alexandre (2004), and Miller, Zaloshnja and Spicer (2007) found that worksite alcohol and drug testing has in fact reduced drug use among employees. Another evaluation study in the transport industry, carried out by Snowden, Miller, Waehrer and Spicer (2006), found that truck drivers were less likely to be involved in alcohol-related fatal car accidents because they were subjected to a mandatory random alcohol test. Strong critique against workplace drug testing is based on the accuracy of the tests and people’s right to privacy. George (2005) and French, et al., (2004) suggest that these tests must be administered in such a (mandatory random) manner in order to avoid false positive drug test results. The alcohol breathalyzer test is less intrusive, while the urine drug tests are more intrusive, as the urine is drawn under supervision (Bible 1986).

This study explores the impact of an alcohol and drug testing policy on the workplace. The key research question for the study is: “How does a comprehensive workplace policy on alcohol and drugs influence substance abuse patterns among workers?” Information generated from this study will provide useful information for policy developers and program managers of substance abuse intervention programs.

Description of the intervention: A comprehensive alcohol and drug testing policy

The research took place in a closed mining town in Namibia. For the sake of confidentiality, the name of the company will not be revealed. The mining company introduced a comprehensive drug and alcohol testing policy which involved testing, prevention, treatment, and aftercare. The policy consists of three types of testing, namely, random testing of all workers, fit-for-work testing, which supervisors or foremen can use when they suspect alcohol or drug use, and voluntary testing, whereby workers can check themselves whether their alcohol levels exceed the prescribed limits. People who test positive on the random or fit-for-work testing are offered various forms of help and treatment. People who test positively on the voluntary testing can use one of their sick days to miss work that day.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to assess the impact of the intervention on the nature of alcohol and drug use among workers, and on the workers' perceptions of this intervention. The data for this study were collected as part of a larger study examining the use of alcohol and drugs within the specific mining company.

Sampling

The in-depth qualitative study explored alcohol and drug testing practices in the mining sector. The target population of this study consisted of mineworkers, family members and professionals who lived in the mining town. This paper was part of a larger study to better understand the factors that lead to substance abuse in the mining sector. The researchers collected data through 16 key informant interviews and six focus group discussions. Sixteen of the key informant interview participants were selected based on job category, such as doctor, senior management, or church leader. The focus groups comprised supervisors/foremen, mineworkers, Oshiwambo speaking workers, workers who received alcohol/drug treatment, spouses and children of mineworkers. A total of 56 people participated in the focus group discussions.

The sampling for the interviews and focus groups was coordinated by the research team and a social worker employed by the mine. The research team determined the categories of possible respondents, whereafter the social worker facilitated the recruitment of respondents for both the key informant interviews and the focus group discussions.

Data collection

The qualitative data were collected over a period of four days during the first week of June 2008. Most of the interviews and focus group discussions took place in English, the official language of Namibia. In addition, an Oshiwambo speaking translator/researcher was available at all interviews and focus group discussions, and facilitated the focus group that targeted Oshiwambo speaking workers only.

All the interviews and focus group discussions were held in a private location in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality for the respondents. The purpose and nature of the research was explained to the research respondents before they completed the informed consent forms. For each interview or focus group discussion, there were at least 3 researchers involved; one researcher was the lead interviewer/facilitator, the second researcher took notes and asked follow-up or probing questions, and the third researcher took detailed notes on a laptop computer.

The researchers conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants that were carried out with the aid of an interview guide. Both interview and focus groups were scheduled to last 60 minutes, but some discussions and interviews lasted more than 90 minutes. The key research question asked in both the interviews and focus group discussions was about the implementation of the alcohol and drug testing policy in the mining sector. Immediately following each interview and focus group, the research team held a debriefing session to evaluate the process and to review and clarify data collected, and to ascertain whether there was a need for different processes or questions.

Data analysis

The researchers used several methods to analyse the data. A debriefing session lasting between 15 and 30 minutes took place after every interview or focus group. At the debriefing, the information gathered was reviewed and an evaluation of the focus group and interview took place. With the debriefing forms, the researchers made an initial analysis of the key themes identified after each interview. A constant comparison process was used

throughout the data collection process. After each interview or focus group, the researchers checked to see whether there was new evidence supporting the theme or whether there was evidence raised that conflicted with the theme. The researchers then independently reviewed the detailed notes and debriefing forms for each focus group interview, and coded the raw data for key themes. Each researcher developed his or her own themes; and this was followed up by several meetings in order to reconcile, collapse and organise the key themes.

Findings

Fairness of the policy

Most of the respondents in the interviews and focus groups felt that the alcohol and drug testing policy was both appropriate and fair, at least on paper. Many respondents felt that it was absolutely necessary for the company to conduct random testing, and thought that the availability of voluntary tests was also a good idea. Most respondents pointed out that workplace intoxication decreased as a direct result of the policy:

In my opinion, the company is going growing quite a lot. If we look at the graphs then it came down severely. During certain periods, there are more people away at intoxication leave. The effort to control it is well in place. You can always improve on it, but they are doing quite well. (Mine worker)

Skepticism about fairness of policy implementation

The fairness of the implementation of the policy was questioned by the workers. The biggest concern of workers was disbelief that the company tested managers in a truly random manner. Some workers believed that the managers received warnings when alcohol and drug tests were going to occur, or were even allowed to have their secretary's schedule their alcohol and drug tests. There was also a concern that the random tests were deliberately scheduled to catch certain workers. Furthermore, there was a concern that the random alcohol and drug tests were actually part of a plan for the company to retrench staff:

The testing doesn't seem random. Sometimes they do it is not good. So, it is not always random. For example, you have a party - birthday party of 25th anniversary party – the next day they do random testing. They pretend it is random. And you think why is it always me? It doesn't seem really random. (Mine worker)

Workers are also concerned that the testing devices used, might not be accurate. One respondent raised the concern that tests using different devices showed substantially different alcohol levels.

People are aware of alcohol testing, but some are confused about its details

There was a widespread agreement amongst the workers that people are aware of alcohol testing. Almost all the respondents had been randomly tested for alcohol at least once, some a number of times. Workers further seemed confused about the details of the policy and did not know the differences between the various types of tests or the warning system. Indeed, we noticed that many of the respondents expressed inaccurate information about the alcohol policies and some were unclear about the differences between voluntary, random and fit-for-work tests.

Respondents also indicated that there was much less knowledge about drug testing because fewer workers were using drugs and thus were less likely to pay attention to drug testing. Respondents indicated that while there was much discussion among workers about alcohol testing, drug testing conversations were much less frequent. Furthermore, if the company tests fewer people for drugs, people would naturally be less aware of the drug testing procedures. Many respondents had not yet been tested for drugs, which was consistent with the rate of drug testing in comparison to alcohol testing. Respondents indicated that workers who were currently using drugs were well aware of the drug testing.

I have only been tested for alcohol. I have never been tested for drugs. They don't do it frequently. Because they haven't been tested for drugs, they might not know about it.
(Mine worker)

Communication required between foreman and workers

A number of respondents, including supervisors, managers and workers emphasised that effective communication skills were required for workers to have a detailed understanding of the drug and alcohol testing policy. Several respondents indicated that some foremen might not pass the information about the policy along to their workers in an understandable manner. Furthermore, even if a foreman or supervisor did present information to workers, this information might not be emphasised and repeated sufficiently. A worker might not be clear about the details the first time information about the testing was described, and then did not get a second opportunity to better understand the policy.

Foremen have difficulties enforcing policy

Some foreman indicated difficulties in implementing the detailed steps of the policy. Respondents indicated that it was very frustrating to try to report a worker after doing a fit-for-work test, as it seemed to them that many of the workers got off on a technicality related to how well the foreman followed the procedures. They desired a straightforward checklist that they could use to help them enforce the policy.

Difficulties to report people for drinking/drugs anonymously

Respondents indicated that there was no official way how co-workers could report people anonymously, if they are intoxicated on the job. Because of the great culture among mineworkers of covering up, many workers choose not to report a co-worker who is intoxicated on the jobsite to a foreman or supervisor, fearing the consequences. The fit-for-work testing responsibility lies solely on the foreman, who might also have disincentives for doing a fit-for-work test, for the same reasons. Respondents felt that this was a serious limitation to the current drug and alcohol testing policy related, specifically concerning mining.

Managing drinking

Respondents mentioned that the introduction of the drug and alcohol testing policy has led to many mineworkers managing their drinking. Many mine workers are now aware of how much they are able to drink before going to work while still being under the official limit. This has both positive and negative aspects. For some people, the testing policy has led to more responsible drinking, where workers will limit their drinking in general and, at times, before work shifts. Other workers have now tailored their drinking activities so they are now drinking enough to be just under the alcohol limit, but might still have some alcohol in their bodies, or have hangover effects from the night before, while at work.

The comprehensive policy makes further provision for prevention programs, treatments, and support and after-care for workers who test positively for alcohol and drugs.

Discussion

This qualitative study reveals that a comprehensive alcohol and drug testing policy has a positive impact on reducing the amount of substance abuse on the job, as the percentage of people who test positive for substances reduces on a steady basis. This finding was confirmed by previous research (French, Roebuck, & Alexandre, 2004); Miller, Zaloshnja, & Spicer, 2007). Most workers viewed the policy as reasonable and fair, and strongly supported the policy. The company's alcohol and drug testing policy is a comprehensive approach to stopping substance abuse among workers during working hours. While alcohol and drug use on the job has drastically declined, many mineworkers were still using and abusing alcohol and drugs during non-working hours. The findings from this inquiry show that alcohol and drug use is a serious problem for mineworkers.

The study indicates that most workers appreciate the availability of voluntary testing and believe this has placed more responsibility on the workers themselves. While the alcohol and drug testing policy has been a significantly progressive step for the company, among many workers there is still much confusion about the policy that could easily be alleviated with more information and communication about the policy to workers, and more training and support to supervisors and foremen about implementing the policy.

A central feature of the alcohol and drug testing policy is its provision of substance abuse treatment to those who have tested positively for substances. This is a positive, pro-worker policy, which focuses on getting workers help rather than punishing workers away.

Conclusion

This study concluded that ongoing communication and training about policies and procedures around alcohol and drug testing can improve worker perceptions and acceptance of the policy. This study further suggests that the design of private places for voluntary testing, as well as developing an anonymous reporting system for on the job drinking, can improve the reporting of substance abuse problems.

An alcohol and drug testing policy must also provide for treatment and after-care programs for workers who have a drug problem. The study further suggests that prevention efforts are more cost-effective and pro-active than the treatment of substance abuse; thus, holistic substance abuse training can improve awareness among workers.

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