



Curb **substance abuse** in the workplace

Policies, education and training are essential

All organisations are required by law to comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), which specifies a zero tolerance approach to intoxication in the workplace. This includes both alcohol and narcotic substances. Not only do intoxicated employees pose a danger to themselves and their co-workers, substance abuse can also result in decreased productivity, health problems, increased absenteeism and a host of other 'soft' issues.

Breath alcohol detectors and drug testing solutions are thus often included in the essential equipment of many organisations, particularly those in hazardous environments such as mining, construction and manufacturing. However, equipment alone is simply not sufficient, no matter how sophisticated. An effective substance abuse program should always include the development of clear and fair policies, on-going education, and comprehensive product training.

South African courts have ruled that the prevention of substance abuse in the workplace is a management responsibility, which means the onus is on the employer to ensure that employees who are intoxicated do not commence with work. The right equipment is necessary to detect substance abuse and enforce zero tolerance. However, the process does not begin here.

Before any testing can take place, organisations need to develop a substance abuse policy that clearly outlines all of the procedures involved. This policy defines the parameters for the company and employees to adhere to in order to create a safe and secure environment for everyone. The policy should describe the reasons for conducting testing, including OHSA compliance, safety reasons, health

concerns, risk and so on. The policy also needs to fully outline the testing procedure, including where the test will be done, who will conduct the test and the nature of the screening, whether this is random testing or compulsory testing for every employee on entry. The policy also needs to include a full explanation of disciplinary procedures should employees test positive.

In addition to developing a comprehensive substance abuse policy, awareness is also critical. Employees need to be made aware of the policy, of the possibility that they may be tested and the consequences should they be found to be intoxicated, and they need to agree to adhere to it as one of their conditions of employment. When developing policies, it may be advisable to consult with a subject matter expert, as well as have the relevant unions on board. This prevents all sorts of issues in future, including allegations of unfair practice as well as lengthy and costly CCMA cases.

In addition to developing policies for testing, education should form an essential building block of any organisation's efforts to curb substance abuse. One of the most common challenges organisations face is that their employees simply are not aware of the harmful consequences of alcohol and drug abuse, both on their health and in their personal lives, not to mention at the workplace. In addition, if education does not form part of the process, including why the testing is being done and how it will be conducted, a negative mind-set will be prevalent among employees, and they will be resistant to the process.

Simple things like explaining that a breathalyser test in the morning does not mean the employee cannot have a beer or two the night before will go a long way towards improving attitudes towards the testing. In addition, emphasising that

testing improves everyone's safety, and explaining that this is not just a way for the company to fire people, will be of enormous benefit. In addition, helping people to understand the financial consequences of alcohol abuse, as well as the propensity of alcohol to drive physical abuse and aggression, can assist employees to understand the benefits of abstaining or reducing alcohol consumption. Education as to the consequences of substance is vital so that employees can make informed decisions regarding to their alcohol consumption.

Education can take many forms, from educational talks to distribution of pamphlets and booklets. However, whichever format organisations choose, they should be aware that education is an on-going process. It is not sufficient to have a single session during the induction of new employees. In addition it may be advisable to get a SHEQ representative or other expert to show employees how the testing equipment works, to demystify the process, and let people ask questions to ease their minds about the benefits of substance abuse testing.

In addition to policies and education, training the relevant staff members on how to properly use testing instruments is essential.

All staff members who are required to conduct tests need to be competent on the equipment to ensure a fair process is followed. They also need to understand why it is important to conduct two tests with at least half an hour in between in the case of a positive first reading, and how breath freshener, mouth wash, cough mixture and so on can affect results. An expert service provider will be able to assist in this regard.

Substance abuse is a known problem in many industries, especially those that involve working with dangerous equipment. Ensuring a comprehensive process is in place from the start, which includes policy formation, on-going education and complete training, is essential in effectively ensuring safety, reducing risk, and enabling compliance with the OHSA.

by Rhys Evans, Director ALCO-Safe

Rhys Evans is a Director of Alco-Safe ALCO-Safe (Pty) Ltd a major supplier of quality electronic Breath Alcohol Detectors and accessories in South Africa with 43 years of experience in manufacturing, distribution and support. ALCO-Safe (Pty) Ltd also supplies drug detection equipment utilizing individual urine and saliva test kits plus electronic instrumentation which provides an analysis and printout of the presence of up to six different drugs in a few minutes.