



Drug abuse in the workplace - *a growing problem for South Africa*

Operational Health and Safety Act - General Safety Regulation 2A

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Alcohol testing in the workplace has become increasingly common, as the dangers and liabilities of employees being under the influence of alcohol can be significant.

Drug abuse testing

Drug testing however, is less common, even though the consequences are no less severe and the same legislation governs the usage of both substances. Drug testing has often been seen as challenging to implement from a legal perspective, as well expensive, an invasion of privacy, and a host of other perceived obstacles that have limited its use. However, given the growing problem of drug abuse in South Africa and the dire consequences on safety, performance and efficiency, such methods have never been more important. Improvements in available technology have made drug testing easier and more affordable than ever, and this, combined with appropriate education and drug testing policies, can assist organisations to save lives as well as improve productivity and their bottom line.

Problems associated with substance abuse

Both alcohol and drugs cause impairment of judgement that can constitute a workplace hazard, particularly in environments that involve the operation of machinery. Preventing substance abuse in the workplace is not only generally accepted to be best practice, it is also regulated by the Operational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), which applies not only to dangerous environments but to any business in any industry. OHSA General Safety Regulation 2A states that every employer has a duty to stop persons from entering or remaining at work if they appear to be under the influence of intoxicating liquor or drugs.

In addition to improving safety and decreasing risk, ensuring a drug-free workplace can also help to improve productivity and employee performance, which helps to add value to business. Implementing drug testing alongside alcohol testing is essential for OHSA compliance, comprehensive substance abuse control, and ensuring workers are performing to the best of their ability. However, in order to ensure that drug testing does not become a legal issue, a multi-faceted approach is required. This includes substance abuse policies, employee education and drug testing.

Substance abuse policies

Substance abuse policies need to include full details of procedures to be followed when doing testing, outlined as a step-by-step process. It is also advisable to involve any appropriate unions in the formulation of drug testing policies, to ensure that there is no misunderstanding or misinformation at a later stage. Operators of drug testing equipment need not be medical professionals, but they do need to undergo competency training, so this should be included in the formulation of policies as well. Once these policies have been put into place, the appropriate drug testing equipment can be integrated into the organisation.

Equipment

When it comes to selecting equipment, there are a number of different solutions available. Urine testing solutions are often cost effective and are highly portable. They are available as single and multi-panel dip tests, cassette tests where a pipette is used to drop samples for testing onto the tests and integrated cup tests, which incorporate the test panel into the sample cup. However, urine testing is not suitable for all applications, as certain considerations must be taken into account.

Due to the need for privacy, females

must be tested by females, and males by males. There must also be a private bathroom available to obtain the urine sample. This is not always possible however, so for applications where urine testing is not possible, saliva testing provides a convenient option.

Saliva testing uses a swab to produce results in a matter of minutes, and can be used to screen for a panel of five common illegal substances including heroin, cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamines. There are no privacy concerns with such testing, and a male or female tester can test both male and female subjects. However, some saliva testing units can be very large and heavy and are not particularly portable, so organisations need to ensure they select a compact and easy to use system. In addition to urine and saliva testing, test kits are also available that enable the testing of solid substances for the presence of drugs.

Conclusion

Drugs have the potential to cause as many problems in the workplace as alcohol, and the OHSA governs the control of all intoxicating substances, including drugs. Organisations across industries, particularly those where workers are required to use heavy machinery or dangerous equipment, can benefit enormously from the implementation of drug testing policies and procedures. Not only will this help to ensure the safety of all workers, it will also help to maximise efficiency and productivity.

Partnering with an expert service provider who can assist organisations with developing policies and supplying equipment will ensure that this process is uncomplicated and seamless.

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