

Advocates for Workplace Safety

Fran Kavanagh, AWS, Sydney

Each year workplace accidents and diseases claim approximately 3,000 lives, are responsible for 650,000 injuries, and cost Australians as much as \$37 billion. Advocates for Workplace Safety (AWS) is a non-profit organisation that has been set up to pursue policies and standards that will mitigate this wasteful tragedy.

AWS aims to significantly reduce the number of workplace deaths, injuries and illness and their effects through:

- *prevention*: ensuring that all levels within industry and the workforce embrace fully a commitment to health and safety in the workplace
- *support*: providing support and information to families and victims of workplace deaths and traumatic injuries
- *education*: highlighting the inherent dangers within all workplace areas through community awareness programs
- *reform*: ensuring that legislation both encompasses appropriate penalties for breaches of occupational health and safety regulations, and that penalties imposed by industrial courts reflect community standards and expectations.

In NSW, the Advocates for Workplace Safety have begun to implement a comprehensive referral system for families, giving them support at the most devastating of times. Through AWS, families now have access to grief counselling, pro bono schemes with the NSW Law Society and Bar Association, access to expert legal advice and representation at inquests and civil trials, a network of families for court support, financial advice and comprehensive advocacy services with the relevant government and non-government agencies. AWS aims to implement these vital support structures Australia-wide.

In particular, Advocates for Workplace Safety have lobbied for the admissibility of Victim Impact Statements (VIS) in OH&S prosecutions and, in November 1996, the first VIS was taken up by the NSW Industrial Court. AWS has also successfully lobbied for the reinstatement of a grief counselling position at Westmead Hospital, so that families can have access to counselling at both city morgues out of hours.

One of Advocates for Workplace Safety's key objectives is to highlight the inherent dangers within all workplaces through community awareness and education programs.

The number of deaths and injuries to young workers is particularly alarming. According to statistics available from Worksafe Australia, young male workers, particularly apprentices, are at the greatest risk of injury, with a 1-in-12 chance of being injured at work each year, compared to 1-in-18 for older male workers. Despite the vast amount of safety information that has been made available to both employers and employees over the past few years, the death and injury rate has not declined, and lack of training and education remains the chief reason for such deaths, injuries and illnesses in the workplace.

Obviously, information alone is not the key. Advocates for Workplace Safety believes that a cultural change is required to address Australia's appalling record of workplace deaths and injuries. To this end, AWS has established a working party in NSW together with business, government and unions to develop safety management and OH&S curricula for both primary and secondary schools, with particular emphasis on vocational education and training.

Initiatives include providing strategies for students to learn to be assertive and raise matters of concern

in the workplace; encouraging student involvement in designing codes of behaviour at work; developing resource material that will promote discussion about the complexities of occupational health and safety matters; producing brochures on workplace safety for inclusion in School Certificate kits; and promoting safety management as part of the curriculum for schools from Kindergarten to Year 12.

Reporting of workplace accidents in the media remains very low-key, particularly when compared to the attention given to road trauma. Premier Bob Carr, when launching the Advocates for Workplace Safety last year, said workplace accidents had surpassed homicide and road accidents as a major cause of death in Australia. He went on to say, "*If these statistics related to road deaths or violent crime, we would be up in arms*".

However, the money spent on national workplace safety campaigns remains insignificant compared with that spent on national road safety campaigns, which have such a high profile because of the continued existence of Parliamentary committees to review and report on road safety matters. Thus, a combined effort by unions, community lobby groups, industry associations and governments is needed to raise the profile of workplace safety and reduce the appalling death and injury toll. APLA members are encouraged to support this worthy organisation.

Advocates for Workplace Safety is a non-profit organisation which depends on the financial support of individuals and organisations. Membership is available to any interested party.

If you would like more information, phone Fran Kavanagh on (02) 9315 5123.