

PRE-EMPLOYMENT MEDICALS: *Worthwhile or Not?*

By Mark Armstrong

Before an individual commences work in the resources sector, he or she must undertake a pre-employment medical which is a widely-used and accepted practise in Australia.

This medical assessment, which involves attending a medical provider and undertaking a series of tests, is *intended* to identify if the job applicant has any underlying physical limitations that may increase his or her risk of sustaining a sprain and/or strain injury with respect to the job for which they are being employed; that is the claim. However, there is a growing concern amongst a number of allied health practitioners that the testing methods don't meet their purpose.

The majority of pre-employment physical assessments conducted are non-specific; therefore, the results offer little information to the employer about the individual's ability to undertake the tasks the job for which they are being employed.

I made this case in my presentation delivered to delegates at the **Drill 2010** conference in Adelaide recently. Using a volunteer from among the delegates, I demonstrated both the assessments typically used in a non-specific pre-employment functional assessment and; assessments that BAC has developed and trialled successfully for the drilling industry over the past 12 months. The difference between the two groups of assessments would have been obvious to the audience.

The custom-built assessments, and my accompanying explanation, allowed the audience to see for themselves how the link is made between the muscles, tendons and ligaments and the core work tasks performed by individuals working in the drilling industry.

And how, in turn, this information shows a person's functional capacity to perform the work tasks of a particular job.

As an accredited Exercise Physiologist, and a fellow of the Exercise and Sports Scientist Australia organisation, my definition of a pre-employment functional assessment is to determine whether an individual is physically capable of performing the core work tasks in a specific job role.

So why is it that industry continues to use these unproven assessments in their current format and why hasn't a change to relevant testing occurred? This is well-summarised by a well-known occupational physician who, in his recent article, stated that he believed the majority of people in decision-making positions are stuck with tradition; do not review the data; and consequently do not consider some very good and proven alternatives.

While this may indeed be the case, it is no excuse; therefore, one of the strongest messages from this presentation is that a more valid, proven and scientific approach for these types of assessments are necessary. Data-driven systems must be designed and implemented so that all organisations can make informed decisions with respect to using appropriate information when determining whether customised pre-employment functional evaluation systems are actually effective.

I believe that all allied health practitioners have a responsibility to challenge these outmoded and unproven evaluation systems, which could offer alternatives based on research, and encourage organisations to think outside the square in all health and safety areas including the pre-employment process.

There is a need to pilot new systems to prove the worth of these and implement change with a view of optimising the safety, health and productivity of each person working both inside and outside of the drilling industry. For example, one of BAC's company clients, who had not only been using the customised pre-employment approach, but had also changed the order of the pre employment medical process; the company saved some 32% on their employment costs in the previous financial year.

The areas of saving included;

1. Pre-employment process costs
2. Retention of staff
3. Training and induction costs
4. Reduces supporting function costs such as administration.

The change in order puts the pre-employment functional assessment before the medical, drug and alcohol and any specific test, because if the person has a functional limitation, there is no point completing the rest.

The drilling industry continues to grow and make change and this is one area, the health and well being of the human capital who are charged with the responsibility of operating the millions of dollars of capital equipment, that we now need to focus on before this resource runs out!

I can only hope that those of us in the industry, where we have influence over such matters as individuals, take some quiet time to ponder what they are doing within their organisations on this and other related issues. Perhaps as a consequence, see the benefits in change and start working towards making changes that can only benefit their workforce and the industry as a whole.