

When under the influence

Written by Gavin Myers
Sunday, 05 October 2014 21:15



A problem that needs to be met head-on at all levels of an organisation, alcohol and drug abuse is widely acknowledged as one of the most prevalent and serious issues facing the South African workplace ...

Worse still, the prevalence of drug abuse is on the increase, as availability of many of these substances increases and their prices decrease. Ironically though, drug testing in the workplace has traditionally not been as widely implemented as testing for alcohol.

This needn't be the case, says Rhys Evans, director of ALCO-Safe, as improvements in available technologies have made drug testing easier and more affordable than ever. In addition, implementing drug testing alongside alcohol testing is essential for compliance to the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act.

Michael Crossland, substance abuse product manager at Precision Safety Appliances (PSA), says that, for a company, the implications of substance abuse in the workplace are far-reaching. Intoxicated employees may cause an injury, while on duty, that can affect a company's insurance rating. They may damage property, sleep on the job, neglect their duties (resulting in loss of productivity), steal, become violent, cost the company time and money and bring its name into disrepute.

"An employer must be on the lookout for: unruly, aggressive or despondent behaviour; a marked increase in absenteeism and deterioration in health; a definite decrease in productivity for no apparent reason; and an unusually dishevelled appearance," he advises.

If an employee is suspected of being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, testing is the obvious next step. However, says Evans, to ensure that testing does not become a legal issue, a multi-faceted approach is required; including having relevant substance abuse policies in place, employee education and drug testing.

"The OHS Act: 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

When under the influence

Written by Gavin Myers
Sunday, 05 October 2014 21:15

intoxicating liquor or drugs,” he notes.

“Substance abuse policies need to include full details of the procedures to be followed when doing testing, outlined as a step-by-step process. Operators of drug testing equipment need not be medical professionals, but they do need to undergo competency training, which should also be included in the formulation of policies.

“Once these policies have been put into place, the appropriate drug testing equipment can be integrated into the organisation,” he adds, noting that it is also advisable to involve any appropriate unions in the formulation of drug testing policies, to ensure that there are no misunderstandings and no misinformation at a later stage.

Crossland adds that the substance abuse policy must be communicated to all employees. “If the company has a substance abuse policy in place and the employees have been informed of this, and have most likely signed a code of conduct agreement upon employment, any refusal to be tested by the employee will be seen as an admission of guilt.”

Crossland notes that testing must be done fairly, without discrimination and within the prescribed law. Each company may adopt its own procedure, but the following steps are in line with best practice:

- The frequency of tests can be either random or full testing of all employees (this is recommended);
- A passive/screening test should be conducted on each employee entering the work premises.
- If a positive result is found, then a confirmation test should be conducted.
- All equipment used must be of a professional grade and calibrated on a regular basis to ensure accuracy.

When under the influence

Written by Gavin Myers
Sunday, 05 October 2014 21:15

When selecting equipment, says Evans, there are numerous options available. Testing for drugs normally involves a saliva or urine sample. Urine testing is a cost-effective option and highly portable. Saliva testing has gained popularity because it is less intrusive, but it can be expensive.

Kits are also available that enable the testing of substances, such as powders or tablets, for the presence of drugs. Organisations need to consider both the nature of the testing and the cost involved, as well as the specific circumstances of the business and industry.

When confirming the presence of intoxicating substances, the company's policy must advise on what action to take. "Each company may grade certain offences differently, especially when they are involved in safety-sensitive working environments," says Crossland.

"Some may deem it a level one offence (a written warning), others a level three (instant dismissal). This is also dependent on whether the company has an employee assistance programme in place, whereby employees with alcohol or substance dependencies will be given proper care and counselling in order to help them with their addiction."