



EEO Trust

Vero health and safety officer Eliseo Dolon with health and safety manager Glenys Barker.

It's only normal

The cost to business of mental health problems among staff can be significant. Vero Insurance has taken a proactive approach to the issue with its Mental Health @ Work initiative. Glenys Barker explains why normalising the discussion of mental wellbeing is important.

At any one time in New Zealand, approximately one worker in six will be experiencing depression, anxiety or problems relating to stress. The total cost to business of mental health problems among staff can be significant as it may involve not only the cost of sickness absence and reduced productivity, but also the replacement of staff who resign from their jobs because of mental ill health.

Mental health problems have a range of causal factors and many of them arise from one's personal or work life. Work overload, role conflicts, and job insecurity can all contribute to the development of mental health problems. As acceptance grows of the role that work and personal factors may play, organisations are becoming more proactive about seeking help to prevent these problems.

The Vero experience

Vero Insurance New Zealand Ltd aims to be a world class Kiwi insurance company that loves to help and protect the people and businesses of New Zealand. Central to this are the values of integ-

riety, customer focus, excellence and expertise which the organisation applies in the decisions it makes, and to the way Vero people relate to customers and colleagues. These are the guiding principles that are applied consistently throughout Vero and they embody the way the company and its staff operate.

One of Vero's strategic themes is its 'People' goal "to be a sustainable, customer-focused, values-based organisation that identifies, attracts and retains people who absolutely live Vero values and passionately outperform their vision". As part of this, we aim to ensure each of our 920 staff, based at 20 sites throughout New Zealand, is 'enabled' to be effective in the workplace—and this includes maintaining a high level of health, safety and well-being.

The campaign to normalise discussion of mental well-being in the workplace really began back in 2004, driven by amendments to the Health and Safety in Employment Act (1992) which came into effect in May 2003. These specified mental harm as a workplace hazard that both employers and employees had a responsibility to manage. There was also a growing interest at this time in



Evidence indicates that the great majority of employers seriously under-estimate the prevalence of mental health problems among their employees.

developing good practices around emotional and mental well-being at work.

Since then, Vero has continued to expand best practice and monitor global trends and issues in the area of health, safety and well-being, identifying mental health as an area of significance. With this genuine desire to enhance the well-being of staff, we addressed the issue of mental health more widely as part of our 2009 business plan, introducing the Mental Health @ Work initiative to align with other people strategies and complement the existing well-being programme.

In 2008, the UK Government's Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Well-being set out to analyse the most important drivers of well-being and develop a set of evidence-based actions that would benefit both society and the individual. Five key actions emerged—*Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning, and Give*.

In 2009, the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand incorporated these actions in its 'Winning Ways to Wellbeing' programme. Vero adapted the 'Winning Ways' message and promoted it widely with a poster that was well-accepted throughout the business and is still widely visible in many areas. The message was simple—by following the five key actions, you can support your own well-being and that of others around you.

Because Vero takes a holistic approach to health, safety and well-being, the Mental Health @ Work initiative was readily integrated into the day-to-day business. We publish regular articles on mental health in the fortnightly company newsletter, and information is circulated via the large network of first aid/health and safety officers, and through posters highlighting the issue.

On-line programmes, books and courses are all available and enable employees to learn or enhance coping skills in a supportive environment. One-on-one support for individuals is provided where required, and one-on-one coaching and support is also available for managers and team leaders to help them support their staff.

A measure of success

While the importance of mental ill health as a cause of sickness absence from work is generally acknowledged, it is not always accurately measured. Evidence indicates that the great majority of employers seriously under-estimate the prevalence of mental health problems among their employees.

Vero staff are required to complete a Return to Work questionnaire following a period of absence due to illness or, in some cases, when one- or two-day absences are occurring on a regular basis. This way we can more readily identify problems and, if necessary, intervene early.

Our managers and team leaders play a key role in the early

identification of potential issues. They can seek further advice and assistance from the people and development team and/or the health and safety manager if additional specialist support is required.

Much less is known about the role mental health problems may play in impaired performance while people are at work. At Vero, however, regular performance and development reviews for all staff provide the opportunity to discuss performance issues and, if necessary, put action plans in place. Our competency framework enables managers and team leaders to assist individuals to identify their training needs. This is especially relevant to the mental health support provided under the behavioural competencies of resilience and stress management.

When considering the cost impact of mental health problems in the workplace, it's important to remember that depression, anxiety and stress can contribute to the development of a range of physical illnesses, including serious conditions such as coronary heart disease. And some of the costs may be difficult to quantify as a fear of discrimination or even dismissal may lead some employees to disguise mental health problems and blame absence or under-performance on ill-defined physical symptoms.

By normalising mental health issues, Vero has endeavoured to mitigate these adverse consequences. Taking a truly holistic approach has enabled us to intervene early when a problem is identified. Employees are encouraged to make use of external agencies for support. They can self-refer to an employee assistance programme for counselling assistance, or to maternal mental health services, alcohol and drug services, or other agencies that may be useful and appropriate for their ongoing well-being.

Organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation and Working Well offer a large range of resources and Vero has established a strong working relationship with them. Similarly, the mental health services within the district health boards are equally supportive.

The fact that a stoic male staff member will willingly speak about a mental health issue is a clear indication that he knows he will be supported in his journey back to good health.

The benefits of well-being

Our well-being programme recognises the benefits to an organisation of having healthy productive employees. Workplaces are an ideal environment to promote, support, and improve employee health. At Vero, flexible work arrangements are widely promoted. So, too, are physical activity challenges such as the StepItUp campaign—which is based on using the stairs at work—and the annual Feetbeat and Bikewise challenges. Weigh2Go, a healthy weight management programme, an annual flu vaccination programme and a

collaborative programme with ACC—'Safety Workout'—are all currently in place.

For the past five years, Vero has attained a 'top five' placing in the large companies sector of the 'Best Place to Work' survey. Ninety percent of employees responded to the survey in 2009, with 79 percent responding positively to the statement 'This organisation cares about the well-being of its people'. And 77 percent responded positively to the statement: 'Vero is committed to supporting the diversity of its staff'.

Our focus on normalising mental health issues in the workplace gained momentum last year when Vero was profiled in an EEO Trust article in its publication *It's the so-called 'soft' issues that are often the hard ones* and in a video interview for the Mental Health Foundation's 'Like Minds Like Mine' campaign.

Further evidence of the success of our approach is an annual staff turnover of a comfortable eight to 12 percent over the past 12 months and sick leave has been reduced to a steady two percent (or lower). Along with this, EAP counselling costs have shown a regular pattern over the past five years, despite this being an early intervention counselling tool that employees have easy access to. Annual usage is 2.16 percent against the national organisational usage rate of 5-7 percent.

At Vero, the Mental Health @ Work journey has begun in earnest. Supporting employees with mental health issues is an ongoing chal-

Some useful resources

- The Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing <http://www.foresight.gov.uk/OurWork/ActiveProjects/Mental%20Capital/Welcome.asp>
- Mental Health at Work—Developing the business case: http://www.scmh.org.uk/pdfs/mental_health_at_work.pdf
- Mental Health Works—Why mental health in the workplace matters: http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/facts/why_it_matters.asp
- EEO Trust article (Diversity in Action/Winter 09)—*It's the so-called 'soft' issues that are often the hard ones*: <http://www.eeotrusted.org.nz/news/newsletter.cfm>
- Like Minds Like Mine video available on-line on the MHF website: <http://www.likeminds.org.nz/page/5-Home>
- Workplace Health and Safety Strategy for New Zealand to 2015: <http://www.whss.govt.nz/snapshot08-09/WHSS-Strategy-snapshot08-09.pdf>

lenge that will continue to be enhanced. Maintaining good mental health in the workplace is not only essential for the individual, it is also a challenge facing business and society as a whole. **et**

Glenys Barker is health and safety manager for Vero Insurance NZ in Auckland.

Improve PERFORMANCE: Ensure the Winsborough 360° is part of your Leadership Management
www.winsborough.co.nz | Ph 04 499 8777 or 09 354 3250 | email info@winsborough.co.nz