



PII: S0925-7535(97)00047-7

TECHNICAL NOTE

DRIVING THE SCIENCE OF PREVENTION INTO REVERSE

John Culvenor

VIOSH—Australia University of Ballarat, P.O. Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria 3353, Australia

1. Introduction

The use of television, along with other mass media, is becoming popular in Australia as a way to attempt to prevent accidents both on the roads and at work. Most notably the Victorian Traffic Accident Commission (TAC) for about seven years has saturated the media with messages that drivers, labelled *bloody idiots*, ought to watch out for *fatigue*, *lack of concentration*, *impatience*, and so on. Their stern advice is accompanied by violent images of car crashes supposedly demonstrating the effects of not heeding their warnings.

In what seemed to be an extension of the TAC style of campaign into the arena of occupational health and safety, the Assistant Minister for Industrial Relations, Mr. Gary Johns last year launched a national mass media campaign coordinated by Worksafe Australia. The campaign featured an advertisement known as the *Bear Trap* previously used by the Victorian Workcover Authority. The advertisement consisted of an industrial workplace scene featuring an open bear trap and a number of workers, one of whom was blindfolded. The blindfolded worker put their hand in bear trap and SNAP! The caption read: "Inexperience can be a death-trap".

The bear trap posed no treat to the workers without blindfolds indicating that the risk of workplace injury is due to ignorance of hazards on the part of particular workers. Given that the message did not focus on management of the hazard, but on promotion of worker awareness, the message seemed to be a perpetuation of the *myth of the careless worker*. Unfortunately while campaigns like these may be attractive public relations exercises, the messages often used have the potential to return the focus of prevention to the victim-blaming of the past. Furthermore the underpinning reasons behind this particular campaign are questionable.

2. Targets

Prior to the campaign, Worksafe Australia commissioned ANOP Research Services Pty Ltd to conduct a benchmark survey of community awareness and attitudes toward occupational health and safety (ANOP, 1995). The advertisements were then aired and followed by another

survey to evaluate the impact of the campaign (ANOP, 1996). The pre-campaign survey involved interviewing 2004 working-age people throughout Australia to discover their views on occupational health and safety issues. The post-campaign survey consisted of re-interviewing 502 of the original subjects to assess recall, message takeout and to revisit the original questions. The pre and post-campaign reports documented descriptive statistics about the responses to each question and some cross tabulations but no statistical tests were reported.

Based on data from the initial research, the campaign was said to address two main issues.

The 'under-estimation' of OHS risk

New national research shows that most people are unaware of the high incidence of death and illness at the workplace. (Johns, 1996)

The vulnerability of young people to injury and illness

New national research shows... that young people just starting work are particularly vulnerable. (Johns, 1996)

2.1. The 'under-estimation' of OHS risk

One of the main conclusions arising from the pre-campaign survey was that survey respondents underestimated the likelihood of workplace injuries and illnesses.

... only about one in six (18%) believes that they might themselves sustain work-related injuries and illness. Contrary to these perceptions, more than one-third (36%) of those interviewed reports having a work-related injury or illness at some point during their working lives. (ANOP, 1995, p. 8)

This conclusion was based on the responses to two questions in the survey.

1. *Have you ever had a work-related injury or illness? (36% YES; ANOP, 1995, p. 56)*
2. *And how likely or unlikely is it that you will have a work-related injury or illness in the next 12 months — do you think it is very likely, quite likely, not very likely, not likely at all? (18% total 'likely'; ANOP, 1995, p. 53)*

The main flaw in the conclusion above is that the 36% were indicating that in their *lifetime* they've had an injury or illness whereas the 18% were estimating the chance of an injury or illness in the next *12 months*! Therefore it seems that people actually tend to *overestimate* the chance of a workplace injury or illness. If the aim was to correct flaws in community perception, on the basis of this research, a campaign reassuring people that a workplace injury is really quite rare would have made more sense.

2.2. The 'vulnerability' of young people

The campaign is said to be based on research showing that young, inexperienced, employees have a disproportionate number of accidents in the workplace. For instance, Ian Ramsay, General Manager, NSW WorkCover supported the campaign with: *'Indeed, 17 per cent of all major workplace claims came from the 15–25 age group.'* (Ramsay, 1996), while Gary Johns validated the thrust of the campaign toward young workers with this comment;

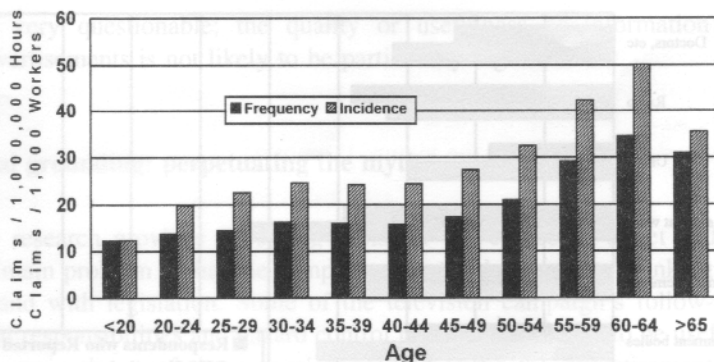


Fig. 1. Claims frequency and incidence rate by age (source: Worksafe Australia, 1995, data for 1992–93).

'The 15–24 age group recorded 26 deaths over a 12-month period. Obviously that is unacceptable and we are working hard to turn it around' (Johns, 1996).

While injuries to any age group are a compelling reason for preventative actions, the statistics cited above provide no reason to target youth in particular. Given that nineteen percent of employed people are between 15–24 (ABS, 1995), the proportion of claims by this age group (15% for 1992–93 according to Worksafe Australia, 1995) is consistent with the proportion of employed people in this age group. This group therefore make about as many claims (actually slightly under-represented) as we might expect given their involvement in the workforce.

The relationship between the number of claims and the number of workers is known as *claims incidence*; often cited as the number of claims per 1000 workers. Statistics of Worksafe Australia (1995) show that the under 25 age group have a lower claims incidence than *any* other age group (Fig. 1). Similarly, the claims frequency rate (claims per one million hours worked) of the under 25 age group is also lower than of *any* other age group (Fig. 1). It seems that young workers are actually slightly under-represented in injury statistics; however becoming ensconced with this too would be a mistake. Considering the main body of the workforce (20 to 50 year old workers) the statistics really bear out that the rates are very similar between ages and a focus on one particular group makes little sense.

3. Medium

The conclusions of the pre-campaign report (ANOP, 1995) indicated that the research showed television to be a suitable medium for the campaign.

The communication campaign needs to target these less well informed members of the community. The research confirms the strategy of using television to raise awareness levels among these groups. (ANOP, 1995, p. 13)

Television ranked highest among prompted responses to a question about health and safety information sources. In addition, the pre-campaign report suggested that television was an important conduit to those least informed. 'Significantly, the least informed groups are particularly reliant on television as an information source' (ANOP, 1995, p. 12). Fig. 2 shows

