

A clean and safe workplace

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Having a drug and alcohol-free workplace is about more than just eliminating the two from the work environment, according to Jon Carswell, farm supervisor West Otago and Southland for Dairy Holdings.

He told a workshop at the South Island Dairy Event (SIDE) in Dunedin at the end of June the company wanted to be an employer of choice.

"We wanted to attract staff because we were drug and alcohol free and we wanted to retain staff once we got them."

He said Dairy Holdings had seen a marked change in their staff since implementing the policy several years ago.

"We knew our churn of junior staff was too high but we didn't know why. We really didn't realise what a problem we had until we started the policy and then we began to see the benefits. Milk production lifted and now we take our people with us," Carswell said.

"A lot of our young people are now stepping up and taking on roles with greater responsibility. There has been a culture change."

Their accident register was also looking a lot better.

Matthew Beattie of Instep said if employers didn't intervene when drugs and alcohol were a problem in the workforce, staff performance deteriorated "until either the person leaves or they die".

"By adopting a drug and alcohol-free workplace policy you are saying to your staff you want to look after their safety."

Once the decision was made, buy-in was important from the top management down.

"We started with testing our chief executive and all our office staff," Carswell said. "We had to be the leaders in the programme before taking it on-farm."

Now random urine tests are carried out and all candidates when they apply for positions within the company are tested.

"We have the right to dismiss a person if we find they've been using drugs, but there must have been a good reason why we employed this person in the first place so instead we offer a counselling service to get them off drugs and back into the workforce.

"It's about getting rid of the behaviour, not getting rid of the person."

Test results are confidential between the employer and the employee but Carswell



Jon Carswell – culture change.

and Beattie advocate farmers in an area getting together so those with drug and alcohol problems do not drift from one farm to another.

"This is a health and safety issue," Beattie said. "A lot of farmers, when they're thinking about having a drug and alcohol-free workplace policy, get harangued by people arguing it's about individual rights, but change that to arguing about responsibility. It's the responsibility of everyone that the workplace is safe."

Carswell said Dairy Holdings staff still get together socially and drink but they do not do it on-farm or in work time. There is no "a few drinks at milking at the end of a hard week".

"We're not stopping them having fun but they do it in their own time and away from work."

Research shows about 3% of New Zealanders need treatment for drug or alcohol addiction.

Others are using drugs and alcohol and require intervention to prevent them becoming part of the addiction statistics, and to allow them to sustain high performance levels at the workplace and not cause accidents, injury or damage to equipment.

Although there are no statistics on alcohol and drug use in the NZ workplace, in the US 70% of abusers are in the workforce and they are five times more likely to cause accidents involving themselves or their workmates.

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