

In any other field, this level of death and injury would not be tolerated. We must change the national psyche, writes Jerry Ellis.

In the past year, it seems that death has been hard to escape: gangland killings have smothered the front pages of our newspapers, prompting us to demand urgent action to stop those and each of the other 300 or so murders recorded nationwide; in macabre awe we watched our television news bulletins filled with dramatic footage of twisted car wrecks, as another 1600 people died on our roads; the death of an Australian media representative in the Iraq conflict led us to express sympathy to his family and friends; and we clamoured over ourselves to track the every movement of celebrities with life-threatening diseases.

Yet, among all this outrage, grief and indignation, very little was heard about the 2000 or more Australians who died last year from workplace accidents and disease.

Today is the International Labour Organisation's World Day for Safety and Health at Work. While the modern calendar seemingly throws up more cause-related "days" than actual days of the year, this is one we all should note. The size and breadth of the problem demands it.

Consider these statistics:

- In the next year, about one in every 20 workers will suffer a work-related injury or disease.
- Every 2.4 minutes someone will be injured seriously enough to lodge a workers' compensation claim.
- Tragically, our young workers will be particularly exposed, with 50 suffering compensatable work-related injuries every day, five of those resulting in permanent incapacity.
- The Australian economy will suffer to the tune of more than \$30 billion a year - that's about the equivalent of the annual GDP for Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the ACT combined.

As a community, we need to demand that workplace safety and health become a priority that cannot be compromised.

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In road safety, for instance.

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Page 2 of 2

We are rightly proud of Australia's excellent road safety record, where we have consistently led the world. This environment fosters innovation and commitment, which has seen broad community acceptance of - even demand for - initiatives such as compulsory seatbelt wearing; the .05 laws, introduction of booze buses and speed cameras; and confronting advertising campaigns.

Yet in workplace health and safety we are a long way from leading the world. According to the ILO, the best-performing country, Sweden, has a record of work-related fatalities more than twice as good as Australia.

Twice as good - or, to put it another way, Australia is twice as bad as we ought to be.

Sadly, there are no quick fixes to the problem. The issues holding Australia back in Occupational Health and Safety are complex. Some are structural, some attitudinal, some are to do with Australia's capacity as a globally small economy to quickly introduce new safety design and technology.

But underpinning all these issues is the "care factor". Do we, as a society, really care about enough about OHS to demand change? Are we outraged at the current state of affairs?

Awareness is an important step. The National Occupational Health and Safety Commission, made up of representatives from employers, unions, the Australian Government and each of the states and territories, recognises the importance of raising the profile of workplace safety and health.

We hope to highlight to the community the extent of the problem, the specific issues that need our most urgent attention, and the roles each of us can play.

We seek to penetrate the national psyche. For although we have made some improvements, the rate of improvement needs to be much faster.

As a community, we need to demand that workplace safety and health become a priority that cannot be compromised.

To do this, we must move from a culture that accepts the status quo, to one where safety comes first.

Jerry Ellis is chairman of the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission.