

# FIFO induction must include mental health advice: Mitchell

**R**enowned broadcaster and mental health advocate Glenn Mitchell has called for a greater emphasis on suicide prevention and mental wellbeing during the induction process for FIFO workers.

Mitchell's plea comes in the wake of a parliamentary inquiry into the mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements in Western Australia following the suicide deaths of nine FIFO workers in the last 12 months.

The inquiry was ongoing at the time of print, with an initial report due in December and the full report expected to be delivered by March.

Mitchell conducts regular mental health and suicide prevention talks across several mine sites in WA and he believes it is imperative for mining companies to educate new employees about the mental pitfalls of a FIFO lifestyle before they start their first swing.

"Because it's such a bizarre way of working, I really think they need to do something at the pointy end to actually explain to these blokes and women about the industry they're going into and what the challenges will be to their family environment and what the challenges will be to them personally," Mitchell told **Paydirt**.

"They need to be told right from the beginning that these are the feelings you are likely to experience, this is how these feelings will manifest and this is what will happen when you go home. A lot of things can be put in place before a person gets on a plane for the first time."

A sports journalist and broadcaster for more than 30 years, Mitchell has become a strong advocate for mental health and suicide prevention since resigning from his position at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2011 following a mental breakdown and an attempt on his own life.

The 51-year-old now shares his story in a bid to remove the stigma attached to talking openly about mental illness.

It has been brought to Mitchell's attention that very little – if any – education about the impact of a FIFO lifestyle is included in a worker's induction programme.

One mining company even told Mitchell there was not enough time in the induction process for such a discussion amongst the raft of safety procedures which need to be drilled into new FIFO employees before they start working on a mine site.



Mental health advocate Glenn Mitchell has called for changes to the FIFO induction process

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"If you're doing 30 hours of induction – six hours a day for five days – you should be able to find one hour somewhere in all of that to be able to get a psychologist in to talk about the effects of FIFO on the worker and the family," Mitchell said.

"I have a real big issue that if the only way you can make a profit is to have people flying in and flying out, then don't spend 20% of the 30 hours on physical safety and 0% of it on what's happening with their mental wellbeing. It's prudent because FIFO is going to have a bigger impact on mental wellbeing than most other workforces in the country.

"So much time, money and effort is put

into the physical dangers, but a lot of those physical dangers can be amplified if someone is not in the right mental space and that should be one of the big triggers for that industry."

Mitchell has been encouraged by some of the processes put in place by bigger mining companies such as Rio Tinto Ltd, BHP Billiton Ltd and Fortescue Metals Group Ltd in recent years, including the introduction of peer support groups and confidential employee assistance programmes.

However, there is still plenty of work to be done in his eyes, particularly when it comes to rosters and social isolation.

"These people have got to be engaged when they're not working and I know a lot of them are tired from working 12 hours in the heat, but you've still got to be able to give them those options to do something," Mitchell said.

"If you're driving a haul-pack truck, you might be air-conditioned but you're sitting in a box by yourself for maybe 9.5 hours of a 12-hour shift and then after that might have a bite to eat and go back to your room, so you're not really having any interaction and being able to talk about any issues you've got in your life."

Mitchell also questioned why mining companies were not required to report suicide deaths as is the case when there is a fatality on a mine site due to an industrial incident.

"These nine suicides are only stats that have been made public as a result of this inquiry being launched," Mitchell said.

"What we don't know – and will probably never be questioned – is if a bloke who is due

to go back on a swing tomorrow, if he takes his life in Perth, that's not a FIFO death, although it might be totally predicated on the fact he just can't face going back to work, so the nine deaths in camp could well be 15 if there are five or six others out there we don't yet know about.

"You hear all sorts of stories about how FIFO work is disruptive to family life and how FIFO workers have a higher level of depression, but you never hear about any suicides and that's something that needs to change for us to win the battle."

– Michael Washbourne