

# Finding solutions for high fatalities



By Dr Keith Hampson, CEO of the CRC for Construction Innovation

Despite improvements in safety in construction over the past 20 years, the industry's fatality rate remains unacceptably high.

Construction site labour makes up 8 per cent of the Australian workforce but accounts for more than 15 per cent fatalities in the workplace. On average one person is killed on a construction site each week in Australia. Thousands more are seriously injured.

According to figures released by the Australian Safety and Compensation Council for 2003-2004, the fatality rate in the construction sector equates to a 6.7 fatality rate per 100,000. The figure is probably even higher when you take into account disease-related deaths. The construction fatality rate is an estimated five times higher than the mining industry.

Clearly, there is a need to articulate a shared vision across industry and government to guide effective principles and practices

that will improve safety on Australian construction sites.

The establishment of the Office of the Federal Office Commissioner – a recommendation from the Cole Royal Commission into the Building and Construction Industry – provides a mechanism for influencing construction OHS outcomes.

The CRC for Construction Innovation was established following a recommendation from federal government's 1999 Building and Construction Industries Action Agenda, addressing the need for a national research body to tackle complex issues of importance to the industry, highlight best practice, promote innovation and enhance productivity.

Construction Innovation brings together industry, government and research teams to work on research projects of importance to the property, design, construction and facilities management industry.

Two current safety projects in progress at Construction Innovation are the Safety Competency Framework and Safer Construction – a Voluntary Code of Practice – both provide a valuable contribution to safety issues across the industry.

The Safer Construction project seeks to reduce construction workplace accidents by creating a voluntary national code of practice in OHS.

It is, therefore, essential that construction industry (both in the private sector and major government agencies) drive the project with the support of the appropriate national policy and research organisations.

Led by Tim Fleming, operations safety manager, NSW/ACT Region – John Holland Group, the Safer Construction project team works collaboratively with the Engineers Australia convened Safer Construction Taskforce, chaired by Leighton Holdings chief operating officer, Bill Wild.

The Safer Construction project supports the Taskforce by examining occupational health and safety practices at the design, procurement, construction and commissioning stages of built assets to develop the voluntary code of practice and supporting tools. This project brings together stakeholders

across the supply chain of the project, ensuring a whole-of-industry solution.

The voluntary code of practice will be launched in Canberra on September 12.

Dean Cipolla, group safety manager of the John Holland Group, has led a second Construction Innovation project to develop a Construction Safety Competency Framework.

This project provides a means for industry to address safety at a national level, tackling issues that impact on safety management, such as the transient nature of the workforce. Labour mobility makes it difficult for any one company to consistently influence safety attitudes and behaviours because sub-contractors hear different safety messages when they move to different companies, projects and sites.

The safety competency framework project team identifies roles within the industry that have a significant impact on safety culture and then mapped to these roles the required attitudes and competencies to successfully drive a positive site safety culture.

Achieving improved OHS through culture change is critical. We shouldn't talk about safety as a "number one priority" but rather as a deeply held value that remains

constant throughout business.

The framework was launched by Federal Safety Commissioner Tom Fisher and the former minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews, in Melbourne in September last year.

The Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner has further endorsed the framework by supplying additional funding to develop implementation guides and support kits for industry.

The kits will provide "how to" guides for those currently undertaking OH&S responsibilities but also include the relevant qualifications human resource staff should look for when recruiting staff for those critical positions.

Our industry must continue to display leadership and commitment to safety. Everyone associated with the industry has a role to play – OH&S is indisputably a shared responsibility.

The behaviours industry displays and rewards will shape the culture of the construction workforce, for both existing workers and those the industry needs to attract in the future. The challenge is to ensure that proper regard for OH&S is a key part of that culture.

Lives depend upon it.