



TIME AND MOTION

Insisting on lunch breaks is one way employers can help ensure a healthy workplace, says a visiting expert concerned about the pressure on WA workers due to the skills shortage

WA workers under extra pressure from the labour shortage were skipping required lunch breaks, with the informal blessings of their bosses, visiting international leader in physical activity research Fiona Bull warned.

It was an unhealthy practice that heightened worrying problems from modern sedentary living, Professor Bull said.

Employers pledging to tackle health problems in a busy, ageing workforce that was far more likely to be plagued by chronic diseases needed to overhaul their informal work practices and social values, not just their formal policies.

“Lunch breaks may well be a formal requirement but informally workplaces are actually encouraging and endorsing people working through their lunch,” Professor Bull said.

“More and more workers say the pressure to stay at work and complete their work is requiring them to work through lunchtime. They eat at their desks and this is not healthy.

“It is not only the physical health — the back strain, shoulder strain, neck strain — but actually sitting and the lack of movement and lack of physical activity. There is also the mental strain — staring at the computer and working for long continuous hours.

“Also a social break is important for employees to informally mix in the workplace and have a break from the mental focus of work and to lead to greater productivity in the afternoon.”

The ideal lunch should be a break away from the desk for 30 minutes or more, Professor Bull said, allowing time for a short walk or some activity, as well as eating.

And in such a competitive market as WA, with much effort being put in to attract and retain staff, insisting on a lunch break was part of a suite of things employers could do to show they were thoughtful, valued staff and were offering a better place to work.

Professor Bull has worked at the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organisation. Now a visiting academic at the University of WA, she has worked in Perth in past years and holds a post at the UK’s Loughborough University and is co-director of the British Heart Foundation’s National Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

WA had a long history in the area of workplace health, she said, but her observation was that the State, as a whole, had not moved on much from the eighties and nineties. However, a few key private companies had managed to move well ahead of the pack.

Despite recent gains made by the Premier’s Physical Activity Taskforce, there was still a lack of leadership in workplace health reform from governments. They were not actively driving the issue as they should, she said.

She urged governments to step in and act as role-models, firstly taking workplace health seriously in their own workplaces and showing what could be done. Funding demonstration projects could also act as a catalyst for change.

They also needed to provide formal resources to draw up healthy workplace guidelines and to offer tax incentives and subsidies and transport and planning policies that favoured healthy workplaces. Support also needed to be given to small business and the voluntary sector, areas that traditionally found it hard to make healthy changes

because they lacked the resources.

“I think there is an important opportunity and need for the government to take a lead,” Professor Bull said.

“I think the most pressing crisis, which appears to me, having been back a couple of months, is the labour shortage in WA. Keeping the workforce and our younger workers in WA, and in some sectors, as they are being attracted by the mining sector and up north.

“If you want to attract and keep good workers, the care and concern and the approach the workplace takes around wellbeing will be important. Arguably, it is no longer a nice thing to have; it is essential.

“And there are many opportunities for WA to be a world leader in this area.”

Anne Bellamy, WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry director of health, said while changes in the economy always brought to the forefront different health issues, on the whole, WA’s boom had brought benefits, with many employers already introducing health-improving programs in a bid to retain staff.

On the whole, there was now a much wider acceptance in the State that healthy people were productive people, she said. And many businesses had begun making simple, ad hoc health changes, such as bringing in fresh fruit and entering staff in walking and cycling events.

However, she believed governments could play a greater role in showing companies how to take the next step and formalise changes for the better and ensure they were kept up. Government workplaces should also be committed to focusing on improving health.

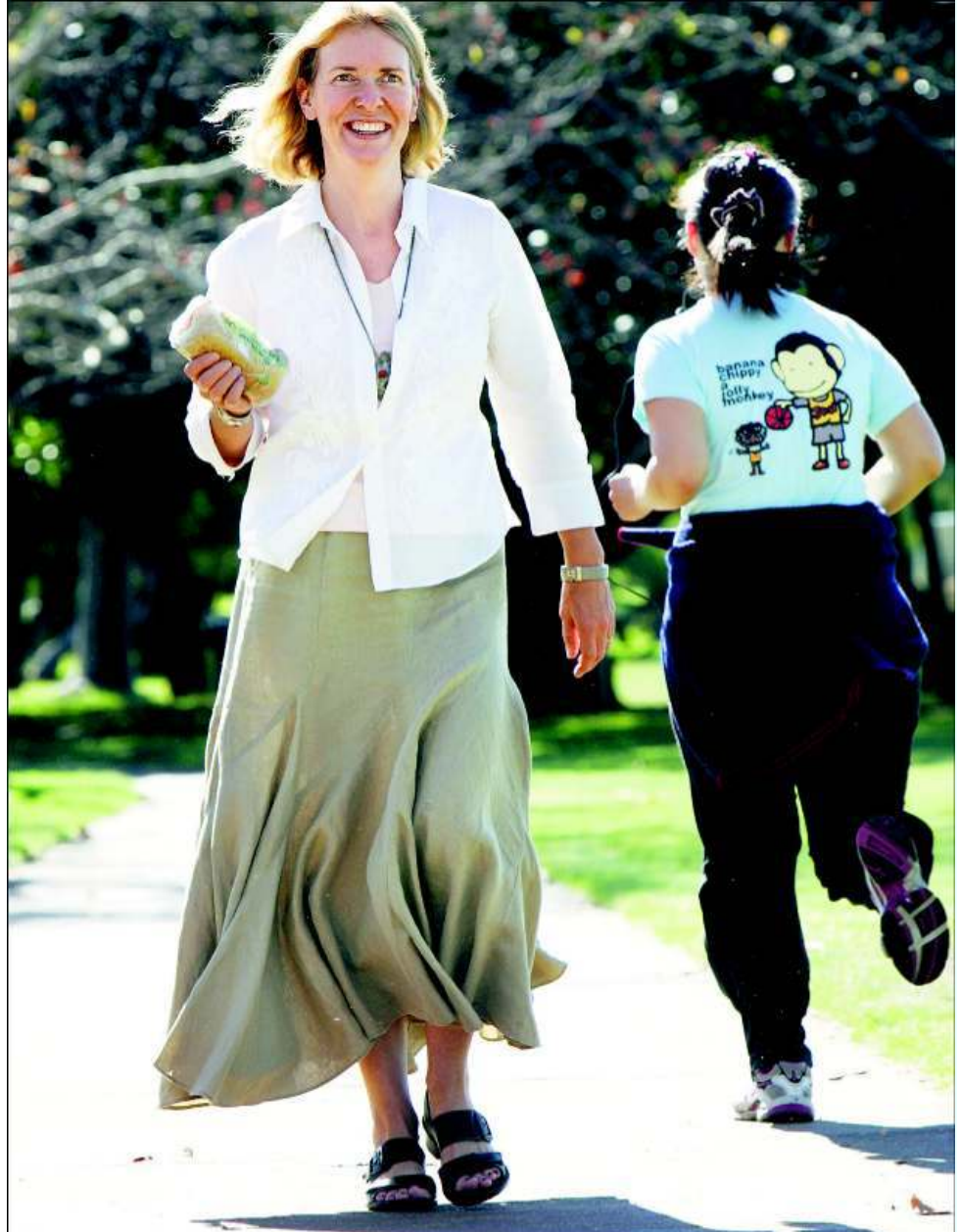


THE RISKS

Sitting too long and sedentary behaviour can contribute to:

- Increases in blood pressure
- Increases in blood cholesterol levels
- Stroke
- Coronary heart disease
- Being overweight or obese
- Type 2 diabetes
- Breast and colon cancers
- Osteoporosis
- Sarcopenia (muscle wastage)
- Depression

SOURCE: PREMIER'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TASKFORCE



Healthy step: Fiona Bull takes a walk during her lunch break at the University of WA. Picture: Dione Davidson