

Alertness CRC Media Release

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Sleep Starved Aussies Run Up \$66b Bill: Report

Millions of Australians are failing to get the sleep they need to live healthy, happy lives, a national scourge that costs the country \$66 billion a year in health bills, lost productivity and wellbeing, a new report says.

The Sleep Health Foundation Report by Deloitte Access Economics released today estimates 7.4 million Australians routinely missed out on adequate shut eye in the 2016-2017 financial year.

“This lack of sleep had harmful effects on everyday function, and exacerbated health conditions from heart disease and stroke through to diabetes and depression in tens of thousands of Australians,” says Professor Dorothy Bruck, Chair of the Sleep Health Foundation, which commissioned the report. “On top of this, it claimed the lives of more than 3,000 people. The cost of sleep deprivation is utterly alarming and confirms we need to take urgent action to put sleep on the national agenda.”

The report found four out of every ten Australians are suffering from inadequate sleep. Half of these people experience ongoing pathologically high levels of daytime sleepiness, Professor Bruck says. The rest know that their sleep is routinely insufficient because they can't function at normal levels of alertness, concentration and emotional control. “This clearly shows that we have an epidemic of disabling sleep loss affecting a large chunk of our population,” the sleep psychologist says. “Put simply, we have 7.4 million Australians who are not getting the sleep they need to fully function throughout the day.” The results are especially concerning when considered alongside new research suggesting sleep is vital in allowing each cell, in every organ of the body, to continue to function. “No wonder sleep deprivation is such a highly effective form of torture,” Professor Bruck says.

The report puts the financial cost of sleeplessness at \$26.2 billion a year. This includes a health bill of \$1.8 billion and lost productivity costs of \$17.9 billion, a substantial sum which includes \$6.7 billion in costs arising for employees underperforming on the job. Financial costs also include home carer costs of \$0.6 billion, and \$5.9 billion in deadweight losses like welfare payments and missed tax revenue.

When you add loss of wellbeing costs of \$40.1 billion the annual sleep bill climbs to \$66.3 billion. “The numbers are big, the personal and national costs are big and their consequences should not be ignored,” Professor Bruck says.

Despite the considerable cost associated with sleep problems in Australia, the issue receives very little policy attention from governments, Deloitte economists found. “Sleep – or rather the lack of it – is a substantial burden on our economy and the livelihood of Australians, dampening mood, exacerbating health problems, dulling our productivity and making us a danger on the roads and in workplaces around the country,” Professor Bruck says. “As these results show, it’s time governments gave sleep the policy airtime it deserves to get our citizens sleeping better and longer.”

The report recommends that Work Health and Safety authorities tighten regulations in work sectors where sleep is irregular but responsibility is high, such as defence, transport and health. In particular, they call on new policy that ensures the nation’s tens of thousands of shift workers have body clock-sensitive rostering and well-timed exposure to dark and light to ensure they feel alert on the job and sleepy at bedtime. Regulations were also needed to limit excessive work hours and encourage lighter, brighter building designs proven to help keep staff more alert.

The report also calls for a carefully-worded public education campaign around sleep that Deloitte deems inexpensive and highly effective. “Australians are not prioritising sleep. They think it’s tradeable for waking time which it most definitely is not. Re-educating people could have powerful results,” Professor Bruck says.

Any campaign would be wise to include warnings around the use of blue light emitting from computers, tablets and phones at night, the report says. “That light wreaks havoc on your body clock and is the reason many people struggle to get to sleep at night after sending emails or watching a movie on their laptop,” she says.

The report also calls for increased policy effort be devoted to research on the causes of sleep disorders as well as better prevention, early detection and cost-effective treatment options for people with sleep problems. “Ultimately, the responsibility for reducing fatigue must be shared amongst government, industry, the workforce, the public and the scientific community,” Professor Bruck says. “Now is the time to step up and address it.”

View to the report, *Asleep on the Job: Costs of Inadequate Sleep in Australia*, at: www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au.

The Alertness CRC is proud to be a sponsor of the Sleep Health Foundation Report.

About the CRC for Alertness, Safety and Productivity

The Alertness CRC is an industry focused research program committed to maximising alertness in the workplace. The mission of the Alertness CRC is to 1) Promote the prevention and control of sleep loss and sleep disorders, and 2) Develop new tools and products for individuals and organisations to improve alertness, productivity and safety. <http://www.alertnesscrc.com/>

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About Sleep Health Foundation

The Sleep Health Foundation is Australia's leading advocate for sleep health. The Foundation aims to improve people's sleep and their lives by promoting healthy sleep, raising awareness of sleep disorders and building partnerships with organisations. Free, independent, expert-reviewed fact sheets on every aspect of sleep are available at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au

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