

Oil and Fat

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In the oil and gas industry, the “S” is surely the biggest part of the “HSE” equation (health, safety, and the environment) in terms of liability and expense. But a lowercase “h” would better represent the lack of attention paid to health—yet “h” issues kill more people every year in the industry than the “S.”

Twenty years ago, when I started working for the industry, the people in this profession were perceived by the general public as young, dynamic, and healthy—traveling and working in remote places, and leading a glamorous, adventurous, Indiana Jones-type life.

However, the truth is sadly different. When medical professionals in this industry meet, although we are concerned that HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and diarrheal diseases are a problem among our workforce, we are shocked that their effects are minor in comparison with the number-one killer—lifestyle-related diseases. Obesity, in particular, is responsible for the high number of deadly heart attacks among oilfield workers.

The bottom line is that more people from the oil patch are dying from heart attacks today than from vehicle or work-related accidents. In 10 years, if nothing changes, half our workforce will be overweight or obese and at greater risk for experiencing heart attacks, strokes, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, high blood levels of artery-clogging cholesterol, respiratory problems, and an increase in certain cancers.

The Root Cause

In a world where 1 billion people are overweight or obese (defined by body mass index; see www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi) and where 20,000 people die each day from heart attacks, the oil and gas industry is faced with a workforce that is only getting older and fatter. A formal health-risk assessment is not required to understand the root cause of the problem. It is a simple case of too much food and not enough exercise!

The people in our industry, although well educated, show little understanding or motivation when told that they need to lose weight—until they have a heart attack themselves or learn of the brutal, unexpected death from cardiac arrest of someone close to them such as a family member, friend, or colleague. Many oilfield workers epitomize the “that’s life” or the “it won’t happen to me” mentality.

People just do not seem to take their health very seriously. They figure that life is too short to not enjoy fatty, high-calorie meals washed down with a few glasses of alcohol or soda. Modifying bad habits is always being put off until a few years from now. It is considered easier to take a medication to reduce blood sugar rather than to decrease consumption of extremely sweet carbonated soft drinks; another medication to reduce cholesterol levels rather than eat less butter, fries, fast food, and processed food; and a third medication to reduce blood pressure rather than lose a little weight by walking and moving more.

Our computerized, motorized, remote-controlled, and sedentary industry spends millions of dollars per year on safety training and personal protective equipment. In addition, each of our companies also spends millions per year to cover the health costs of its workers, but a big chunk of the health bill is a direct or indirect consequence of the overweight and obesity issue. It is a reactive cost.

What are we doing proactively as an industry to improve the health of our workforce? Are we providing our employees and their families with the tools to

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In 2003, he developed the Curative Malaria Kit used today by more than 25 international companies to diagnose and treat fatal forms of malaria. He was honored in 2005 for this idea with a Social Responsibility Award at the World Petroleum Congress in South Africa.

Barbey chaired the Oil and Gas Producers’ Association Health Committee from 1994 to 2004 and, since 2004, has cochaired the committee. He has been an active member of SPE since 1992, cochairing the health part of the SPE International Health, Safety, and Environment Conferences in 2004 (Calgary) and 2008 (Nice) and was a member of the Executive and Organizing Committee for the 2010 conference in Rio.

live longer and healthier? What can we do as an industry to improve the life expectancy of our people without infringing on their personal right to shorten it? It is my belief that we must do more at the work site, where, after all, our employees spend most of their waking hours. A few simple and rather inexpensive initiatives implemented at rigs, ships, bases, and offices worldwide could go a long way.

- Eat better, healthier, and less food
 - Improve the food at company-managed locations by encouraging the catering staff and cooks to learn how to produce attractive, good-tasting, low-fat, low-sugar meals. Each catering company should have a trained dietitian to create healthy, tasty, and diversified menus. Eating healthy does not mean eating bland and insipid food. If our employees do not want to eat less, they can at least eat better. This does not mean plain boiled fish, veggies, and apples at the end of the serving line that are frowned upon and passed up by most employees after a hard day's work in a demanding job. People are entitled to a well-prepared meal that looks good, tastes good, and does not increase their cholesterol, blood pressure, and blood sugar.
 - Modify the "eat as much as you want or can" dogma accepted in most locations to "do yourself a favor and serve yourself only once." A reduction in plate size as well as portion size would also go a long way in reducing weight gain.
 - Close and lock the food areas between meals to prevent nibbling.
 - Where and when possible, replace the candy, junk food, and soft drink machines with fresh fruit distribution. Sell fresh fruit and natural fruit juice at a cheaper price than candy, junk food, or soft drinks to make them more attractive pricewise. Provide the healthiest beverage alternative to coffee, tea, and cocoa by installing a cold-water dispenser next to the coffee pot and soft drink machine.
 - Offer fresh fruit and bottled water during company meetings in addition to the usual soft drinks, coffee, pastries, and cookies.
 - Provide a free mid-morning fruit plate. This option would help employees avoid consuming cake or cookies along with their coffee and also make it easier for them to eat less later at lunch, thus maintaining or reducing their weight.
- Move more
 - Encourage people to be on the move for at least 1 hour per day. This does not mean that they have to play squash or run 10 miles every day. Any physical activity helps burn calories. We need to educate our people to use their two legs and walk. It is simple, cheap, and realistic. Group walks can be organized around offices, bases, or on rigs.
 - Install attractive, simple-to-use treadmills and stationary bikes in the gym rather than weights and body-building machines. The percentage of people using that great-looking and expensive body-building equipment in the gym, on the rig, or near the office is a relatively small, dedicated number. Treadmills and stationary bikes can also be installed outside the gym, in easy-to-access places, such as near the coffee machine or in the cafeteria. A little cycling during a coffee break is a great stress reliever in addition to being a calorie burner.
 - Promote the use of pedometers to measure the number of steps walked each day. Pedometers range from simple mechanical devices to data recorders that communicate with

WiFi technology but the purpose is the same: to make people aware of how many steps they take. The objective is 10,000 steps or 1 hour of walking per day.

- Lose weight
 - Encourage Weight Watchers and similar support group programs at company locations to motivate and train people how to improve their eating habits and lose weight.
 - Explore awards, incentives, and other forms of encouragement and motivation to get people to lose weight. Some incentive programs have found that a few dollars (as low as USD 50) for each kilogram (2.4 pounds) lost and not recovered over a year is an effective motivational tool.
- Measure fitness
 - Institute a quarterly voluntary testing program at work locations that rapidly, easily, and inexpensively identifies people at high risk. This should include calculating body mass index, measuring blood pressure, and diabetes detection using dipstick analysis of urine samples.
- Involve families
 - Offer classes for spouses on how to prepare foods in a healthier manner for their families.
 - Include family members in the walking and moving initiatives. Their inclusion will make for fewer obese children in the future.
- Commit management
 - Why not include fitness objectives in the yearly personal work objectives? After all, as an industry we spend millions of dollars training our employees. Each trained employee lost to lifestyle-related health conditions is a monetary loss for the company and the industry in addition to being an emotional and financial loss for his or her family.
 - Agree on fitness objectives between the consenting employee and manager at the beginning of each year—losing weight, walking a certain number of steps per day, or, for a certain amount of time, stopping smoking, or other fitness initiatives.
 - Consider fitness rewards for those who meet their objectives—a home treadmill or stationary bike, running shoes, or pedometers for the employee and family.
 - Use our imagination and problem-solving skills to promote healthy lifestyles. I am certain that management and the workforce can identify numerous other courses of action to improve the overall fitness of our people.

Conclusion

It is an irrefutable, somber fact that people who are overweight or obese are most likely to experience more health problems and generate higher medical bills than their thinner colleagues. They also die younger, producing and earning less in their lifetime, and unfortunately leaving their children and family a lot sooner.

The big question is, how will we operate as an industry in as little as 20 years from now if we do not change the lifestyle choices of our workforce today? Of course, it is each individual's personal, voluntary decision to make the effort to modify lifestyle for the better. But it is also the industry's responsibility to educate about, promote, provide, and encourage lifestyle modifications that benefit workers, their families, and the oil and gas industry.

If nothing changes over the next few years, I'm not certain that oil and fat will be able to live and work together. **JPT**