



**Australian Government  
Department of Immigration and Citizenship**

Secretary  
Andrew Metcalfe

Comcare National Conference

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Workplace Safety: Everyone's responsibility, everyone's  
business!

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to be here.

I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate all the winners and the finalists at the awards ceremony last night. Can I place on the record my thanks and appreciation for my own team – many of whom are here today – who have shown such great commitment for improving our health and safety arrangements, and whose work led to us being finalists in two award categories last night.

I would like to start by telling you about a couple of defining moments in my role as Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship – both of which occurred within the first few months of my appointment.

Firstly, we had the tragedy of the *Malu Sara*, an immigration response vessel that disappeared in the Torres Strait on October 2005.

It resulted in the deaths of five people, three of whom were not authorised to be on the boat, and a subsequent coronial inquest.

That incident was a tragic loss for the families and communities of the Torres Strait, as well as a terrible shock for the department.

It was also personally very confronting for me as the new Secretary of the department.

Soon after the *Malu Sara* tragedy, I was approached by the very distraught wife of a departmental officer who had passed away recently.

She was clearly upset by the way she had been treated by the department in the aftermath of her husband's illness and wanted to ensure that better support was provided to other partners in the future.

This was another very confronting moment.

What both of these very serious incidents highlighted, was that the department was an organisation under enormous pressure.

It was under so much pressure that it could no longer attend to that most fundamental of issues within an organisation – caring for the health, safety and wellbeing of its own people.

That may sound like a simplistic statement, but in an organisation of 7000 staff across 95 locations throughout the world, the potential resultant damage was enormous and clearly unsustainable.

It was very clear we had to act, and act decisively.

And if the organisation could not care for its own people, then how could it effectively carry out the business of nation-building through a world-class migration program?

Since 2005, DIAC has gone on to initiate the largest business and cultural transformation of a government department in recent decades, and there is not one single part of the department that has remained untouched by this enormous change.

It was clear that not only did we have to overhaul areas such as our immigration compliance and detention activities, we had to adopt a real commitment to client service, we had to adopt positive values and become a far less embattled, far more outwardly engaged organisation. I know that I have asked a great deal of my staff, and I and they, take great pride in the great progress we've made.

Instilling a new culture of behaviour and values had to come from the top.

The leaders in an organisation are closely scrutinised and we had to be seen to be living the values we espouse others to follow.

We started by developing a very clear statement of what we do, through the motto: **people** our business.

This motto has two elements to it.

Not only are our external clients and stakeholders part of our business, but our *own* departmental people are also very much part of our business.

It was a motto that was developed after asking for staff input, so that staff felt ownership of it.

We added another level of detail by developing three strategic themes for the organisation to guide every aspect of our work.

These are to:

- be an open and accountable organisation
- have fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and
- ensure well-trained and supported staff

The final point – ensuring well-trained and supported staff – is the strategic theme that has been the foundation of a major change in the way we care for our own people.

And it has shown results.

The department's Comcare premium has reduced by almost \$3 million (from \$9.2 million in 2007-08 to \$6.4 million in 2008-09)

Furthermore, in 2007-08, the department incurred a penalty of almost \$400 000 for its poor management of claims.

However, by 2008-09 Comcare awarded the department a **bonus** of just over \$44 000 for its **high** performance in managing claims.

A reduction in our “claims frequency” was probably the most significant reason for the bonus.

Our claims frequency actually halved in the year from 2006 to 2007.

This reduction is due primarily to concerted efforts from the department to reduce the frequency of claims and associated time off work.

This work has included an active and targeted approach to the high cost and complex claims.

It also involves the implementation and refinement of a range of strategies to prevent injury and effectively manage return to the workplace in a timely manner.

The number of workers' compensation claims received during 2007, is lower than for 2006 (147 claims compared to 176).

And the number of accepted claims for 2007 is 101 claims compared to 157 in 2006.

So how did we go about tackling the very major issue of workplace health and safety in the department?

Well, firstly, we did what the title of this speech suggests: we made workplace safety everyone's responsibility, everyone's business.

We had to change the view (and I know it exists in a number of departments and agencies), that when a case was considered to be an OH&S issue, then it was HR's problem, and the business areas had no further responsibility in the matter.

Essentially, from the business areas point of view, the department did not have widespread engagement into the reasons why and how an incident occurred and how to get the person back to work as soon as possible.

That is no longer the case in DIAC.

Our Executive Committee is provided with quarterly reports that provide real time data on things such as workplace absence days per full-time employee, compensation claim rates, compensation average time lost rate and compensation average costs (benchmarked against APS averages).

It means they are constantly aware of the human costs and financial costs.

Team leaders and senior managers such as division heads are constantly engaged and supported in their dealings with injury prevention and management.

OH&S has been placed as a standing agenda item at meetings across the organisation, ranging from the Executive down to team meetings and is integrated into all departmental policies and procedures that are developed.

It makes the issue very real and it is kept on the radar.

As I said earlier, occupational health and safety is now **everyone's** business

We developed a three year Injury Prevention and Management Plan to promote and put into practice health and safety practices.

Our aim was to reduce the number of injuries and illnesses across **all** work areas in DIAC.

I signed an Employer Statement of Commitment, committing DIAC to actively work towards attaining the targets set out in the plan.

We also entered into a partnership agreement with Comcare in August last year to further demonstrate our commitment to OH&S.

The plan was reviewed and endorsed by our national OH&S committee and includes partnerships between our national office and our state and territory offices.

The key initiatives of the plan include:

- implementation of a Competency Framework and Learning and Development Program for Rehabilitation Case Managers
- increased reporting to senior managers on compensation and non-compensation cases
- development of a practical instruction manual for rehabilitation case managers
- early intervention and management of psychological illness training provided to supervisors and senior management
- The development and implementation of our injury and illness management policy, and the introduction of a new rehabilitation model.

The Injury Prevention and Management Plan 2006-09 (which Comcare assisted us to develop) has now reached all of its planned targets and is now going through an annual review – an incredible achievement.

I'd like to talk to you about some of the programs we have introduced.

Throughout the workforce, employees with life-threatening illness often experience significant difficulties in maintaining and managing their employment. Many employees who are carers of people with life-threatening illnesses also face such difficulties.

Personal, home and family commitments sometimes force employees to work fewer hours or even give up work all together.

The *Caring for Our Colleagues* Policy and Guidelines which we introduced earlier this year, enables the department's supervisors, co-workers and HR staff to provide high quality support to employees suffering from a life threatening illness or employees caring for a person with such an illness.

Another program we have introduced is the *Rest & Stretch break software* computer program, available on all DIAC PCs.

This program was designed and developed by the ABS - and we are very proud to utilise this program throughout DIAC, and I would like to acknowledge the wonderful work and product ABS have provided to us.

To reduce the risk of developing occupational overuse injuries, it is recommended that employees take regular breaks from repetitive keyboard activity. Indeed, over 50% of DIAC workplace injuries are sustained by occupational overuse.

The *Rest & Stretch* program is highly customisable and we have recommended that all DIAC staff use it.

Indeed, I've probably now been talking today for 30 minutes, and there's another ten to go. I think we should all stand up, take a short break, have a stretch, and then I'll resume!

Another thing I would like to mention to you is that we treat compensable and non-compensable cases equally.

This is significant because it sends out the message to our staff that their health and well-being is important to us – whether or not it is a major case, and whether or not the incident occurred at work.

We want them to return to work as soon as it is appropriate for them to do so. And we want to provide them with the best environment and support to enable that.

Long-term, we know that this will contribute to our aims to be an employer of choice.

Another way in which we support our staff is through our newly-launched departmental maternity leave “*Come Back Pack*”.

It provides employees with a package of information covering a range of topics related to parenting, as well as departmental support and services.

It includes information about preparing for return to work, information about flexible work arrangements and facilities available at DIAC for feeding babies.

And there has been recognition of what we have achieved through the introduction of programs such as these.

We were selected as finalists in the industry best practice *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission Awards* in two categories – Leadership; and Return to Work.

DIAC have also been selected to participate in many Comcare Projects this year, which looked at best practice in regard to workplace practices and injury management strategies.

Comcare has also referred DIAC Health and Safety staff to other APS and ACT Government Health and Safety Sections to work with them collegiately on high cost claims, because we are now considered to be at the forefront of return-to-work programs, and have been honoured to share our experiences with our APS/ACT Government colleagues to ensure industry best practices in this area.

All of this was achieved while we got on with “business as usual” throughout the department.

In DIAC’s case, this is a very intense and fast-paced environment.

In 2007-08, we:

- processed 25.7 million passenger and crew arrivals and departures
- dealt with 1.7 million phone calls to our Sydney and Melbourne contact centres
- approved the visas of 158 630 migrants and 13014 humanitarian entrants; and
- granted visas to just over 278 000 students

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, I would like to say that we are extremely proud of what we have achieved through our efforts in improving health and safety at DIAC.

Yes, there was a financial advantage in doing so.

But more importantly, we did it because caring for the health, safety and well-being of staff is the sign of an inherently decent and healthy organisation.

It is of course a further benefit that healthy, happy staff are more likely to be productive and efficient workers.

Caring for staff has multiple spin-offs that ultimately benefit us all, and it is the reason the Department of Immigration and Citizenship remains committed to a culture of further improvements in health, safety and well-being.

Thank you