

CHAPTER 12 Miners: long hours shifts

We interviewed five male miners and their female partners. These miners work in an open cut mine in a single town. They each drive large machines, generally on 12-hour shifts. The most common current pattern of shifts is 2 x 12 hour days, 2 x 12 hour nights and then four days off. This amounts to 48 hours work in an eight-day period with alternating night/day shifts within the roster. A number of the interviewees had worked other forms of roster. Several worked overtime in addition to these hours, for example Steve sometimes worked an extra night shift taking his hours in the 8-day period to 60. Their overtime was paid. However, some worked unpaid overtime: Steve, for example always went into work 30 minutes early 'so I can find out what is going on' and become oriented for work. In general this group of workers were explicit about 'doing it for the money'. There was little sign of love for the job. Some had taken on the occupation for what they felt would be short periods, only to find themselves many years later approaching retirement in the same job.

For some of these workers, there was a sense that their children would probably leave home – and the town - soon after finishing school so time with children had a limited horizon. Each worker felt – and each partner agreed – that they had missed out on 'full fathering', in the sense that they had missed important events for their children. While some felt that their relationship would always come first ('we would leave if we felt it was a risk'), each recounted stories of marital breakup in the town and each saw a link between working time arrangements and the pressures on couples. In each household, the women parented and worked around their partner's hours, adopting a residual model of partnership, where the full-time, shift-working pattern of the male breadwinner dominated household life.

The impact of unreasonable hours upon the whole community was very clear in this town. There were positive sides - with one mother having good links with others and moving the kids to the house where the father wasn't sleeping off his shift work during the day. But there were also downsides – for local clubs, sporting groups and the community. While fellow shift workers understood and shared the downsides of the eternal pursuit of a good sleep during the day, neighbours had fallen out with each other as they lived with each other's noisy dogs, lawnmowers, children and boat engines.

Day/night 12 hour shifts

Families and employees found changes in their rosters very unsettling.

Steve: Everybody's settled – and then they go and change it. I don't know why they're like that, but it's every time. You know, a different roster and once everyone is happy with it, then they change it again. It's been like that all the time, you know.

Joanne: They get someone from [overseas] to tell them how to live with a shift!

Steve: Yeah so they're spending a lot of money to tell us about how to cope with these shifts. That was when they wanted to swap our roster round like from 8-hour shifts, we were doing days, nights, afters and they wanted to swap us around to days, afters, nights. They wanted to swap us around.

Several workers and their partners spoke of the strain of working a mixture of nights and days. Steve and Joanne would prefer hours that were more regular and find it hard doing day shifts mixed with night shifts. The combination of irregularity and long hours took a toll:

Yeah it's the changing that knocks you around. You get tired and you just can't speak. You're knackered once it's over.

Joanne: Like this week, you work Thursday and Friday and then you're back to Saturday nights. On the Friday you come home from the day shift and just go to bed, every night.

The work/eat/sleep cycle dominates life

Like other long hours workers, these describe a tightly circumscribed life of work, eat and sleep. This robbed time from the worker, the relationship and the household:

Joanne: He doesn't get anytime to himself these days.

Steve: Yeah well that's right, you'd have [to have] a bit more time at the end of each day.

Joanne: We don't get a lot of time to enjoy what's going on.

Steve: [When I'm on nights] I come home, I'll have a drink, have a shower and then go straight to bed. ... Same as when I'm on dayshift, I get up go to work and then come home - on a day shift I come home at 7 –

Joanne: ...Shower, tea time, bed time.

Steve: Shower, tea, I might watch an hour of TV and that's it, that's all.

Effects on health: fatigue, backs and pills

These workers did a job that meant they sat all the time, except for their two breaks. They had to signal via a button if they wanted a toilet break and all their activities were monitored 'All the dozers are monitored and you have to press an icon when you want to go to the toilet...They are watching all the time'.

The sitting and immobility meant that workers' fitness was at risk, potentially, and Steve was concerned about deep vein thrombosis 'because you are sitting for so long'. His wife also mentioned his back 'It's does your back in'. Jim also mentioned his concerns about long hours of sitting, and their impact on fitness:

You start to struggle. You know like, you're running yourself down and things like that. It's not only that, like they have fitness programs and that but if you have a look at the people out there [on the job], especially truck drivers, I think it would be very hard to say that you have people there who haven't got pot guts and starting to go into the fat stage and everything like that. If you're unfit, you'll get tired quicker than a lot of other people. And you'll find out there that just because of the long hours there is - that is where you start to see it...

Jim felt that there wasn't much opportunity to get fit. Whereas more regular hours meant more regular activity and meals:

Well my weight can go anywhere from 92 kilos to 86 - it'll fluctuate. I don't drink much and things like that. A few years ago, your weekends were your own. Have a BBQ on the Friday afternoon after work and on Saturday afternoon and you'd always sit down and have a couple of beers. ... But it's hard on your body.

Like other shift workers (eg flight attendants) these shift workers were very reluctant to take sleeping tablets. Their use, however, was widespread in the mine in the views of the interviewees. Steve takes sleeping pills to be able to manage the long night shifts, as well as dealing with the fact that they change from night to day shifts:

Steve: Before I do the first one, I take a pill so I can get some sleep and the next day I'll take one and then the next day because I can't sleep I have to take one at night to get back round the right way.

Joanne: To get back on the right clock!

Steve believes that most of the workers take pills to cope with the changing shifts. He said that at a union meeting, the workers were asked whether they were taking anything to cope with the hours. He said a large majority put their hand up:

A fair few turned up. And when you ask them a question like that and - if you're honest - if they didn't put their hand up they'd be kidding themselves. It's the changing from one shift to another.

Fatigue and safety

Steve said that there had been a lot of accidents on the site due to fatigue. He was lucky enough to have not been involved in anything serious yet. 'Guys are often falling asleep while working... If you are getting a load, you just fall asleep while getting your load' (Steve).

Others described the effects of fatigue:

The fatigue...the worst part about that is by the time you finish the last night shift, it takes you roughly 3 days to feel good again. I would like to see any person no matter how fit they are... We've got people out there - that are driving - working 5 days overtime on their 6 days off! (Jim)

Jim goes on to describe the struggle to stay awake, and the need to take pills:

Especially in the day shift you do go through fatigue periods, especially after you've had [food] because like you've had a bit of lunch or something like that. It's the same as when you finish your shift and you get in the car and you're driving home you start yawning because I think it's probably the pressure of the job or the stress of the day is gone, when you've got to be alert driving for 12 and a half hours of the night.

You know like we have 2 [breaks] - they're the hardest part. If you haven't had sleep you struggle. Like broken sleep and all that sort of stuff. That's why you probably find that a lot of the truck drivers who work out here are on prescribed sleeping pills and stuff like that. ... Yeah I take [names tablet]. Probably at about 11 o'clock in the day before I go to work I'll just go down and have a lay down and a sleep. I'll get up at say 4 or 5 o'clock ready to go to work and then go all night and I don't feel tired when I do that. I can go the whole shift without being tired - you know you might have a few yawns here and there but other than that you're OK.

Like where we are... you have to keep going all the time. ... But where they are coming out of the pit going up the big ramps where they are only crawling along say 1 or 2 kilometres an hour - I feel sorry for those sort of blokes because that's where you get the ol' nod - it's quite easy to nod off.

Jim does not like taking sleeping pills: 'I'm not a great lover of 'em but it's the pressure of the job where you are and that'. He recounts a recent incident where fatigue had affected a worker:

We had a bloke there the other day who couldn't even remember backing into the shovel. He couldn't remember backing into the shovel! - That only happened in the last couple of weeks. He drove probably about 150 metres after his tire had blown out and was running straight into the dozer. Lucky there was no one in the dozer. ... After he got out he was still asleep! ... Oh no, it happens. A lot of blokes won't speak about it, but it does happen...There is a lot of danger in the job.

Laughlin also describes a near miss after he had been doing some overtime: 'I should be dead but I'm not'. On one occasion he didn't take a detour correctly and 'I headed straight down the rock'. He had been doing 4 hours overtime on top of his normal shift. 'I haven't done that for a couple of months now'.

Effects on community

Steve: We've had problems with our next door neighbours with noise. ... Some nights when I'm on day shifts and vice versa you know –

Joanne: And vice versa we could be doing something and not know he needs sleep. We don't know what roster he is on.

Steve: He works at a different site. Their roster is different. I don't know what roster he's on.

They've had problems with lawn mowers and their next door neighbours boat being turned on. Although it's no longer a major problem, they're no longer on speaking terms with their neighbours.

Jim and Marie believe that long hours and the shift arrangements have had a big impact in the town itself:

You can see the difference in the town that the 12-hours shifts have done. Like sporting, this town has produced some of the best sportsmen... Like we've got good hockey players, good rugby league players, good golfers, cricketers, stuff like that, that have come from here and that. But as soon as the 12-hour shifts started again, it just killed it. Like now they struggle to get a football team, where at one time we were putting three teams on the paddock. They struggle. ... But there's only one club now...I used to play a lot of golf but I don't anymore. Well last year I went up there... You know, like by the time you get home and because the club was struggling, because of the loss of the people, it started to increase its prices – it became too expensive.

Effects on relationships

Workers liked the extra days they had off to be with family. Steve and Joanne said that if it ever got to the point that the work was impacting on their relationship, they would leave. However Joanne finds it hard being at home during Steve's long night shifts:

Joanne: When he's on a night shift I feel alone. We've got a dog. I think I'd be very nervous without the dog. ... Especially when you've had a bit of a fallout with the neighbours. We're not quite sure... for reasons we don't know we've had fish thrown on top of the house, marbles, eggs and we don't know why. We don't think it's kids.

However, the shift work and the long shifts also took its personal toll on relationships. Joanne described how a number of families had split their households: 'You'll find that a lot of families have split up, the wives have left town. ... They're still married with families but they are living in two separate houses. ... A lot of people have done that'.

Marie had given up work in the week of interview, because she found that it had 'got too much, with home and work'. She had suffered from a mild form of a panic attack and felt that responsibility for 'everything' had become too burdensome. Jim and Marie have 3 children who are 12, 10 and 5 (though Jim says they are '13, 11 and 7' and is corrected by Marie). Jim says the long shifts have affected his relationships with the kids and partner, especially as they made him 'moody':

Jim: The length of hours? They make you moody, very moody. Yeah.

Jim admitted that he took it out on his family. Marie said that she copes with this by, 'I just tell him to shut up and go to bed! [laughs].' As for the girls, Jim says that 'they just look at me and bolt'.

Marie: They sit there and say 'Oh he's tired and grumpy'.

Jim: But that's what it is. It's the length of hours and that. The thing is people just - like when you're isolated by yourself for say those 12 hours of the day, you're sorta - I can't put my finger on it - you're there sitting by yourself, thinking all the time. And then when like you come back - with the girls running around and screaming, you're thinking 'God, the noise!'

Jim's children competed for his attention when he came home and his middle child 'just clings to me'.

Interviewer: Do your kids ever feel pushed away?

Jim: At times yeah. You can see it a mile away. Like even if you go out of your way to try and not do it. But I think it can be habitual style like that because they want Dad's affections and I'm that tired and that and I say 'I'm tired and I've got to get up early'. They must just sit there and think - well they must think... It's an injustice to them because you know like they need us just as much as we need them.

Marie: The five year old – she cannot comprehend night shift at all. She likes her Dad to be home all day, every day. She cries, if he's not there - 'I miss my Dad! Why can't he be home tonight?'

Similarly, Laughlin's long hours mean that Sharon and their two teenagers miss him: 'We don't see him very much. Except for on his 4 days off'. Sharon did some casual work and she described the effects of both working on their lives:

Like, with his night shift on Wednesday, I'll work Wednesday afternoon and I won't see him til Friday because he'll be gone when I get home tonight. And he works night shift a lot of the time. I don't work a lot but when I do it'll be - I'm coming home and he's gone to work, you know or he's coming and I'm going. Oh it's awful, you don't see each other. ... You can't do the ordinary stuff. ... You can't have an everyday normal relationship.

As a result Laughlin does not see his children's performances and when he is about they are aware of his moods: before the interview, Sharon had asked her 15-year old daughter what she thought of her Dad's work. 'She said "Well we don't see him very often and when we do he comes home cranky and tired"'. Their daughter is aware that she will move away when she finishes school and so the time is precious: as Sharon puts it 'She actually said "I haven't got long" she's 15, "I haven't got long here and...". You know I think she's feeling pressure to make the most of her time here'. Their daughter feels that her Dad isn't around to make the most of it.

Laughlin: I know that ... I know that it'd be good to be around more often. The young fella, he plays soccer and I don't get to watch him play or watch him train.

Sharon: He never really gets a chance to join in with sporting teams or anything like that.

Laughlin feels like he has missed out on a lot. And that his daughter often asks him to go to things but he usually has to say no.

Sharon: He's tired when he comes home. And we have tea and so everyone has so much to tell him and he's so tired - it's just not working, you know? And then when he wants to talk, it's too late...

They feel like their family life and the timing is 'all out of sync'.

Effects on women: 'I'm the mother and the father'

Each of the women in this group fitted their lives around their partners, taking casual or part-time work or not working outside the home. They also described their parenting, as being 'around' their partners who were like visitors to the family. The parallel of the single parent also arose in interviews.

For example, Laughlin and Sharon have kids who are involved in activities and they find that, especially on the weekends, they really need two parents to take them places and watch them, etc. But it is usually left to Sharon, which she finds difficult.

Laughlin: It's frustrating. There's the things I want to do and the things I've got to do.

Sharon: It's like that. And he'll say 'Oh what can I do?' Because he knows that - family life suffers.

Laughlin's work has a big impact on Sharon.

Sharon: I'm the mother and the father. They depend on me... I wash the car, I do all the stuff that you normally think that the man that - you know like the normal, traditional things. So I do the house and all that. Take the kids to where they should be. And the lawns. It's like being a single mother and you've got someone who comes in at different times, isn't it?

Laughlin: I just wander in when I feel like it! [laughs]

Sharon: I was just gonna say that you feel like it's just you and that's it. Like there's no-one else to do it.

CHAPTER 13 Doctors

Those who work in medical practice at all levels have to deal with excessive hours of work. Medical students have an exhausting schedule of study, and as hospital interns they can be overwhelmed by a double regime of study and work as they progress through a series of 'rotations' in the medical, surgical, emergency and other wards. Later, as trainee specialist registrars, they must fulfill requirements for hours and exams in the various specialty fields. All of this can take 10 years or more.

Even when they become senior registrars with a regular (8-5) working week they are to some extent required to be available on call after hours and on weekends. Meanwhile those who escape the hospital system into general practice also face a working life characterised by excessive hours - albeit self-imposed - as they deal with the demands of a busy practice.

This analysis is based on interviews with five hospital doctors - two interns, two early career registrars, and one senior registrar - and the partners of three of these.

Working hours

The hours worked by medical staff depend on a complex range of factors, including the commitment to patient service, training requirements for junior staff, and funding levels. Karen, a senior registrar, describes how the formula for establishing registrar staffing works at one large metropolitan public hospital:

[The hospital] has to have a registrar 24 hours a day to cover the obstetrics service; in addition to that they have an emergency theatre that they run until 10-11 at night, and so there has to be an emergency registrar available to do that - who can't be the same person as the obstetrics person. ... The staffing requirements are dictated by the service commitments that the hospital has.

This is a complex process, based on their waiting lists and how much money they have; Karen refers to another metropolitan hospital that suspended elective surgery for three months due to budget problems.

Three aspects of working hours are seen as problems by doctors - the number of hours worked, the unpredictability of those hours and the mix/combination of shifts.

Long hours

Elinor is enjoying her current hours as an intern in a psychiatric facility, but recognises that longer hours are in store in the next rotation:

Currently I'm doing 50-60 hours/week but in a previous rotation I was doing 70-80 hours, and my next rotation will be back to those sorts of hours. ... Some nights I work late, and the shifts here are until 10pm when you work late; like yesterday I worked 8am till 10pm. And there are weekends here from 1pm to 7pm - so that we don't get our meal allowance - very sneaky!

The structure of weekend shifts varies with the rotation:

So I basically work a 12-day fortnight. I do at least one day on the weekend and a night during the week at the moment [in the psychiatric wards]. Prior to that, when I was working at [the main hospital] I had a full weekend every second weekend and every second weekend I had off. In the next rotation I will be working in respiratory medicine where there's only one intern so I'll probably end up working seven days a week; I won't get any weekends off at all for three months.

Carol, a first year surgical registrar complains about her hours on call (her hospital - unlike some others - doesn't employ a night registrar):

They're terrible. It's an incredibly busy job: an 8 til past 5 o'clock job on most days and when you're on call, even though you're on remote call, often you'll be staying in until at least 9, 10 o'clock at night, if not more often than not until 11.30, midnight, past midnight; and then you can get called back in. And you know, for the last six weeks I've averaged two on-calls a week - which includes one weekend day.

Yes, so its quite a busy job, and over the last 4-5 weeks I've had between 88-96 ordinary hours - because that included working weekend days - and high 30s and high 40s and some overtime; PLUS call backs - two or three call backs. So, it's been very busy, and that's just because the demand's been there for seeing people in the emergency department or having to take people to theatre or whatever.

The unpredictability of hours

David, an experienced doctor training as a plastic surgical registrar, finds the working hours difficult because of their unpredictability:

The other issue is that if I'm on call one or two nights a week, then my wife has no predictability; some nights I'll say I will be home, and I will be home - and other nights I say I'll be home for tea and I get home at ten or eleven o'clock at night. And obviously on those nights I don't get to see my kids and do the things that people who work from 9-5 would do.

Mix/combination of shifts

Often it is the configuration of shifts - rather than the actual number of hours - that creates the problem, as Carol explains about her own situation:

Because when you do 24 hours on call ... the way the on-calls have worked out for me is that I'm on call on Tuesday - and I may only get three hours sleep - and on Wednesday it's a full day, the day on which I can potentially take my afternoon off to catch up on sleep. And then in the evening I'm expected to go to college tutorials; so you don't recover from your on-call until probably the weekend. And then often you're [on-call] on the weekend. So it's quite a very bad run

The Impact of working hours

These excessive working hours together with dysfunctional shift arrangements have a significant impact on the doctors themselves and their families.

Exhaustion

The problem of excessive hours is compounded by the impact of shift combinations, which do not allow doctors enough time to wind down and/or sleep. Gretel, an RMO in a psychiatric ward, describes the difficulties of working back-to-back shifts:

Sleep deprivation - especially when you get home at 11 o'clock and have to go to work at 8 the next day. ... It's hard to go home from working a 14-15 hour shift and go straight to bed. You get home, you have something to eat, and you unwind and get to bed - it's only 5 or 6 hours before you've got to get up and go to work the next day.

Carol, a first year registrar, describes how a long working shift can ruin the whole weekend:

Definitely, it definitely does. Because, when you do 24 hour shifts, and you get one hour's sleep, like, on a Saturday, that completely obliterates Sunday as a day off work; you know, you're asleep!

The pressure of long working hours is accentuated by the demands of study which extend into their training years as an intern or registrar. Karen, now an experienced registrar, reflects on her experience of those years:

So I certainly found that I became extremely stressed leading up to my exams. ... I was at the ... hospital then - multiple 24 hour shifts where I didn't sleep properly, and then I'd have to be up all the next day because I had to do some work and then I'd be back on day shift the following day. And I found that extremely disruptive to my sleep and that impaired my ability to cope with all of the other commitments that I had. ... An example, I did five on-call shifts - which was three 24 hours and two 13-hour nightshifts - in the ten days before my exam. I was just exhausted.

Their extra-curricular life

Because of their long and dysfunctional working hours, doctors' lives often become truncated and limited, some reporting the lack of time for recreational activity - or the loss of whole aspects of their life. Elinor, a first year intern, comments on her loss of fitness:

I don't think my overall health has changed (but) I'm less physically fit, and that's probably the only difference. I'm probably not doing my heart much good.

(Before) I would have the time to go for a walk and do things; and we used to be able to take the kids hiking and all those sorts of things. That's all completely off the agenda now.

She also talks of the loss of large parts of her personal and family life:

I used to go on a lot of picnics with the children, go on walks and things like that. And there isn't the time for that, so there really isn't the time to socialise together as a family. ... I (used to) read furiously, I did a lot of gardening, a lot of vegie growing, our own chooks and ducks and geese, did our own cooking, sewed the kids clothes and all that sort of thing.

Gretel used to be actively involved in a range of pursuits including volleyball, theatre sports, debating, and social activism but laments: 'now it's work and family'.

David, training as a specialist registrar, laments having to give up rowing and fantasises about other recreation possibilities:

I do very little exercise, and that's just simply because exercise for me, I could fit it in, but it would mean cutting in even more to my family time. And often because doing a cycling day/evening/night type roster, it's almost impossible to do classes at a gym. I used to row and I would very much have liked to have gone back and continue to row with one of the boat clubs here, but I can't, because the nature of a cycling roster, days/nights etc, mean that I can't make a commitment to any sports club, I can't make a commitment to get to training because I have no control over the hours. I have no control over my roster and I have no control over essentially the hours that I work.

If I didn't have family commitments obviously and if I didn't have to work one or two nights a week, then maybe one night a week I would go and do something else. ... Probably going to the gym, the main thing - maintaining some degree of fitness. ... I'm underweight, if anything, but certainly I'm not aerobically fit. Because standing in an operating theatre for ten hours a day you don't get very fit, I don't think!

Personal problems as a result of working hours

The personal impact of excessive working hours is often much more significant than merely the loss of fitness levels. Several doctors reported serious difficulties with their lives and relationships, ranging from simple exhaustion to more complex damage to their social functioning. Gretel, a psychiatric RMO, documents the personal impact of long hours:

... chronic sleep deprivation impacts on your mental health, your physical performance - probably makes you more susceptible to getting infections and stuff. That's a big thing. Also the hours you're away from home impacts - whether you've got kids or not - on your relationships and your family and your life outside medicine. So you have to make sure to have a balanced life.

For Carol (without family obligations) the problems were more individual:

I know that when I'm tired I get more grouchy and I snap more easily. And if the job is affecting your mood, like you're basically unhappy with life, it means that you can't really interact very well with anyone. So I mean I think that it's really terrible and if you don't have the support of people around you it makes it very difficult.

Carol, a first year registrar, feels that her whole life is under stress:

I've been incredibly stressed, I have not enjoyed my job, I've not enjoyed life, I haven't been able to participate in my regular activities - I normally play touch football at a high standard in the state. And when the other registrar went away and it was just two registrars - and at one point there was only one registrar on the ward, because they allowed the other registrar to go on leave - I found it very stressful and I didn't make it out to a single session of touch football, and no exercise. I basically went to work, went home and slept. I hardly ever saw any of my friends or my boyfriend, and it was just really bad.

Karen, an experienced registrar, describes her feelings during her internship exams:

During those few weeks before the exam, I was incredibly dissatisfied with my job, I just hated being at work, and just wanted to leave and finish the job; which was a shame,

because under normal circumstances, despite the vagaries of the roster it was a good job.

Gretel describes the impact of a particularly harsh working regime:

I'm a fairly easy person to get on with, but certainly on some of the rotations when I was working for longer hours, I certainly got more stressed out, more snappy, more irritable - probably more so at home than at work; things tended to become unstuck. So I probably became more difficult to live with that time of the year.

Effect on partners

Doctors' working hours also often had a direct effect on the health and well-being of their partners. Irwin complained of the personal impact of his wife's (Elinor) working hours as an intern:

[My] stress levels do go up and I suffer migraine headaches. [pause] I'm trying to think how does that affect me doing what I am doing. It makes it more stressful, that's all. I just keep doing it, keep taking the kids to their events and whatever.

Moreover, he felt had lost touch with his own life:

I have done nothing of my own since 1994, and I've now got a car to rebuild as of two weeks ago. But that's going to take a long time because I can't ... guarantee to get myself time, like four hours at a stretch, I can never guarantee that. I always do whatever I can by sneaking in an hour or two usually.

I was always a walker, and that just takes time, a lot of time, and I can't do that now. Every now and then I can take the kids out for a stroll or something for a couple of hours.

Effect on children

The impact of long working hours on young children is sometimes perceived as less because of their limited awareness of the wider world. Hence, as Gretel recounts, the baby 'doesn't notice' things and if she has normal working hours she believes that it isn't a problem for her three year old:

If you're just working 8-5 like at the moment, you can drop him at childcare, pick him up from childcare; he knows that I go to work and he goes to childcare, and doesn't really notice.

However, the longer shifts can be a problem - for both the child and the parent - as Gretel goes on to explain:

It's like he's got this internal body clock: about 5 o'clock he's asking for me coming home; if I'm working late and not coming home, he does get quite upset because he wants me to put him to bed. ... Certainly he's noticed me going to work, especially when you're working weekends; well you can't even say to them 'well you know I'll get home on the weekends sort of thing'. ... When you're doing the long shifts, when you're working until 8 or 10 and they're in bed when you get home and you leave work at 6.30 or 7 in the morning, you can actually go for like almost 48 hours with almost not laying eyes on them, which is not good for you or them.

The needs of older children are even more pressing, with negative outcomes for both child and parent. Karen, an experienced registrar, comments on the impact of her hours on her partner's 12 year old:

And again, commitment to family is not something that you can just put on hold and say 'I'm sorry I'm not going to be available'. But things are a bit better now that I've passed my exams. ... I guess he's got used to it. I know that when study got mixed into it as well - he's very good about it, but I know he resents it a bit because he's usually told that he can't have friends over during that 6 months leading up to an exam - and I've done two exams. ... But I think that sometimes he thinks he'd like to be like the other kids, where Dad just works a 9-5 job and is home in the evenings and so on.

Irwin describes the impact of Elinor's long working hours on their three teenage children:

I'm quite sure they would like to see more of Elinor, but this is ameliorated by the fact that they've seen very little of her during her study time. So they are seeing more of her. But I think both she and they would like her to be more involved more in what they're doing, their school-work and things like that. But it has to be erratic. The young one has just had a go at us: 'mum hasn't seen her play a game of basketball at all' - ah - but that just isn't possible with her working hours anyway. And the fact that, being at [hospital] now, if someone turns up just before closing - she stays on a couple more hours.

Chalking up a 'time debt' to your partner

In their case, the issue of Elinor's working hours runs very deep in Irwin's mind, and there are signs of trouble to come as a result of the building up of an unpayable 'debt':

Now once again this is confused by the fact that Elinor has been out of circulation for so long because of study. And I think it's a debt situation again. The ambience of the household is a lot better than it was, but it would be a lot better if Elinor could actually put the time into repairing the damage done while studying. She's doing her best, but it just can't be done because she's got to do this internship. It's better than it was, but it could be better, it certainly could be better.

Overall, then, the impact of long and irregular hours on children (especially when older) can be considerable, while in the case of younger children the costs fall more on parents - in terms of lost parenting.

Impact on family and personal relationships

Not surprisingly, family and personal relationships tend to suffer as a result of doctors' working hours. Even single doctors, who have a need for social life, note its absence. Thus Carol, a first year registrar who lives with her parents, feels that her whole social life was on hold during a particularly busy period, and used her annual leave to reactivate it:

I never saw my parents ... (and) I hardly ever saw my friends or my boyfriend. ... I have lost touch with a lot of people - no time to spend with them. ... This week, which I'm off from work, I'm trying to try to catch up with as many people as possible.

For those with obligations to family members, the difficulties are intensified. David, an experienced specialist registrar describes the impact of his working hours on his family life:

The one year old doesn't know. My three year old sometimes says 'I don't want you to go'; and my wife, well, I think she's given up on me (laughs). That's what we do and we just have to find the time to do things together when we're not actually working. The other issue is that some nights if you're on call overnight one night and the next day you've got a list and for whatever reason the operating list goes late, you might think 'oh next day I'm going to finish at five' or maybe sneak a couple of hours early - and if the list goes overtime you might get home at 7 or 8 o'clock the next night as well - which is a real problem.

Meanwhile Jenny, David's wife, has to do the accommodating to the demands on her husband's time:

Most of the time it's alright; it's just the peak time with little kids is sort of first thing in the morning and after we get home from childcare - if it's been a working day - and when David starts work at half past seven in the morning that sort of limits his abilities to do much in the morning.

She reflects on the matter of this accommodation:

I mean, when you're in your late 20s, early 30s, you have this grandiose idea that it will be a shared responsibility thing, but the reality is that it doesn't end up being that way. And it can't be, depending on what the demands of one career is versus the other one. So yeah, I mean there's always an element of the fact that I think that I shoulder the larger responsibility for getting people out of bed and washed and showered and fed in the morning and also at night times.

'We hadn't actually seen each other for 26 nights out of the month'

Karen, an experienced registrar, describes the difficulties of managing family life, trying to juggle two working rosters, children and study:

So I certainly found that I became extremely stressed leading up to my exams, just because I didn't feel that I was doing enough study. And the amount that I was working at the time - I was at the [hospital] then - was multiple 24 hour shifts where I didn't sleep properly; and then I'd have to be up all the next day because I had to do some work and then I'd be back on day shift the following day. And I found that extremely disruptive to my sleep and that impaired my ability to cope with all of the other commitments that I had. And again, commitment to family is not something that you can just put on hold and say 'I'm sorry I'm not going to be available'. But things are a bit better now that I've passed my exams...

As far as how it affects our relationship, it depends a little bit not so much on the number of hours themselves but the way in which Stanley's roster and my roster match up. So, for example, if I'm doing nights, they tend to start 7 o'clock at night; and if Stanley has done a week of nights and then in his week off - or in the time of the day that he has off - I'm doing nights, then at one stage - I was doing a lot of nights in obstetric anaesthesia - we hadn't actually seen each other for 26 nights out of the month. And that's when we start finding things becoming disruptive, because we can't organise social functions, there are a whole lot of things we can't manage to do because of the schedules not matching up.

And the other thing I find a problem is going from days to nights, and when I was at the [hospital] we were going days/nights/days/nights, and switching backwards and forwards. And I tended to get run down and cranky and much less able to cope with stress.

Under these circumstances, even small things matter, as Karen explains:

The whole environment within the house is very tense and there's a lot of pressure on getting things done; and not being able to contribute to my full share of chores and shopping and those sorts of things - because I don't have time - becomes really stressful. Just the little things, like finding that you've run out of bread or milk because you've been at work until 8 o'clock at night and then you forgot to stop on the way home because you were trying to get home to study. Or you were trying to get home to make sure that you sorted out stuff for school for a child the next morning. And those sort of little things really build up so that there would be times where things would be very tense here. And Stanley and I would have a big fight because little things hadn't got done - and they hadn't got done because neither of us had the time to do it.

Irwin, the husband of Elinor, describes the unpredictability of her hours as an intern affects their family life:

Because her hours are not necessarily rostered on long, [if] somebody doesn't turn up at the end of the shift or whatever ... what we've found is we can't really plan ... for Elinor to be available at any time whether she's rostered on or not - because things tend to go wrong ... So my time has to be predictable...

That's been another side effect of not having Elinor around, and it's still continuing, because of the volatile nature of her work - that we can't often go out to do things. Because her time, my time, and the kids time - there's just so much of it, we rarely go out for picnics or stuff like that - not all together, anyway. ... As a family of five, I rarely plan anything in. I see, suddenly we've got four hours, maybe we'll go out to dinner or maybe out on a picnic. And I wouldn't plan it two weeks in advance, usually. ... It wouldn't work.

Irwin is also clearly anxious about his own relationship with Elinor because of her long and unpredictable hours as a first year intern, the notion of a personal 'debt' still looming large:

We're back into the situation of the debt. Our relationship has been greatly stressed during her study time, and she's not able to put in a lot of time with me now, either - partly because, of course, what time she does have she's more likely to spend with the kids. So that stress is still there, we're basically in a debt situation. I don't think it's going to be causing a breakdown of the marriage or anything like that, but I do think that it is unnecessarily stressful, and not helped by the hours she's working.

We can't necessarily plan to do things, so that doesn't help either, that never helps with the relationship, when you never know when you're going to see each other.

Gretel recognises the difficulties of maintaining a good relationship with her partner when working long hours:

Obviously you see less of each other: you're going early in the morning and when you get home late at night your partner's already asleep. I found that if you're working 6 days a week you're trying to get any kind of housework, or cooking or stuff for the week on the other days, it leaves very little time for any social life with your partner or with friends, you know. With having children, it makes things really hard; with all the time you put into family stuff you end up living in this chaos at home because nothing's

organised; and your partner takes on more of the load, and becomes resentful and stressed out because of that.

With David working long and unpredictable hours, his wife Jenny expresses her frustration at the impact of these hours on their family life:

I mean essentially we have no hobbies outside of work and children because of several things. One is that David's rosters are never consistent, so I can never predict; I get about 3 weeks notice as a maximum for when he's on call, so its not like I can think every Wednesday night I can have that night to do something - and neither can he. And then the fact that he works a reasonable [i.e. unreasonable] amount of hours means that he - to his credit, somewhat - he doesn't go off and play golf all Saturday afternoon, because he feels like he should be home spending time with us, which is not unreasonable. So yeah, I mean it just means essentially that we have no time for hobbies outside.

The weekends when David is on call are worse, perhaps because traditionally the weekend is seen as family and personal - rather than work - time:

And the weekends are definitely worse, and that applies to me being annoyed about it as well. Because you know the weekends we could have him around for up to half the weekend, or essentially we could see him Friday night and then see him (again) Monday morning. Which means social activities we go on our own, we take two cars, all those sorts of things; they're an absolute pain in the neck: the pager goes off all the time, it's just totally disruptive. I guess that's the medical profession.

Domestic tension over working hours is sharpened by partners' perception that their partner is not being forceful enough in standing up to the administrative system. Jenny's frustration at the system is evident:

The other thing is that they have this supposed afternoon off. And if I knew that David had a set afternoon off a week, then I would probably make sure I wasn't working that day and he could come home and the girls could see him. But again, that changes around too. So, yeah, I mean something that's a little bit more organised would be better. ...I can't see why it couldn't be. You know it seems bizarre that you can't have plans more than two weeks ahead for what's coming up. Yes, some of the rostering seems bizarre, to say the least. ...

Bargaining for more control over hours

Jenny is equally frustrated by the weakness of David's bargaining position:

No, and that's the painful part of [it] ... he's too junior, and on the verge of applying to get into a training program, so actually his word counts for nothing. And to speak out about any of these sorts of things or to make suggestions is counterproductive, largely - which is pretty pathetic, but that's the way it is. Don't even start me on these things.

Even Gretel, with all her personal strength, was unable to effect the changes she wanted - and to convince her partner that she was trying hard enough!

I felt I was doing a reasonable job standing up to the system and saying "No it's unrealistic for me to work 7 days a week every week; I need a day off" - (but) my partner felt I wasn't doing enough and I was caving in to the system; and there was tension and conflict over that - her thinking I should stand up more and just refuse to do it and that sort of thing.

Patient safety

Given the extraordinary hours and stress that hospital doctors work under, the possibility of resultant harm to patients is an important consideration. Although understandably reluctant to discuss actual medical errors made by themselves or their peers, doctors did outline some of the risks. Carol speaks of the risk of car accidents to doctors themselves as a result of work exhaustion:

I mean I know of people who have had car accidents on their way home - who've written off their cars - I've had a car accident on my way home from a night shift before. And I've got a friend who - when he was at the hospital he was on until 10 and then he was on remote call after that - he was operating all night and on his way home - and he completely wrote [his car] off.

Karen, an experienced registrar, outlines the indirect risk of harm to patient safety because long hours reduced training opportunities for those who treat them:

I think there's a lot of unhappiness among the registrars at the moment - they're working very hard and they're not getting teaching and they don't feel like they're consolidating their skills and in anesthetics that can become extremely dangerous.

Meanwhile David, a plastic surgical trainee registrar, speaks of the more direct risks to patient safety from overworked doctors:

Actually it is to the detriment of patients and staff to do long shifts ... the research has been done which shows that if you work more than 13 hours that's equivalent to driving with a blood alcohol (level) of 0.5; the hours stack up. I can't say it's ever happened, that someone has performed the wrong operation. But I can say that an operation that would normally take an hour, or an hour and a half at four o'clock in the afternoon - if you're doing it at 3 o'clock in the morning it might take you two hours to three hours. And so there's increased risk to patients during anesthetic time, and just all the other things that go with that because of the slow down - you're just not as good.

The causes of long hours

There are several reasons for the extraordinary hours that doctors work, ranging from practical necessity to the existence of a professional culture that resists the reduction of those hours.

The needs of patients

In practical terms, a professional commitment to the needs of patients is the straightforward determining factor: doctors respond to medical necessity. A professional work ethic is universal: the job has to be done and doctors see themselves as the ones who have to do it. However the pressure varies according to the different specialties and particular circumstances, as Karen (the experienced registrar) explains:

The professional work ethic varies with different specialties and it depends on whether there's somebody to cover you. In anesthetics much less pronounced than in some specialties. I think in surgery there is still unspoken pressure that you will only be paid

[for] this many hours, but all your predecessors have worked until the work was finished, and if the work's still there you've got to keep going.

The need for training

Another issue that drives the system of work overload is the ongoing need for medical trainees to secure adequate levels of training. David provides an outline of the hospital-based training system:

To become a consultant surgeon, you have to complete basic training and then 4 years of advanced training in the specialty that you want to become a consultant in - as a training registrar. At the moment, most of the surgeons - 60% - who come out would do at least one or two service years, so effectively you do 6 years of training but only four years are accredited.

'We are told not to take our leave'

Thus there is pressure on junior staff not to take their annual leave entitlements because it would jeopardise the fulfillment of their training requirements, as Elinor discovered:

I mean the award says, actually, that we are entitled to five weeks annual leave. But we've been told quite clearly we are not to take any more than three. So people look at the award and say "oh look they are entitled to all this leave" but we don't get it. We've been told quite clearly we are not to use that amount, because then we can't get registered because you know we have to have x number of weeks of experience and so on. It's a very nice neat little catch; they can say officially we've got five weeks leave, and that's all very good. But in fact, in practicalities, we cannot - because the hospitals won't employ more people, we can't have that extra time.

Competition for training places

Another reason for trainee staff to take on extra workload is that refusal might jeopardise their entry into a subsequent specialty training program. Karen, an experienced registrar, describes how this pressure on junior staff operates:

I think a lot of junior staff feel pressured to work [extra] hours to get themselves into a training program or to get a good report out of their attachment. But if they can't finish [in] their working hours they're paid to do, then it's preferable for them to stay four more hours and get it finished, so that the next morning they're telling the boss that they got the work finished than it is to be honest and say 'I could not possibly have got this amount of work finished in the time available'.

'Keep your nose clean and your mouth shut!'

Even David, with his years of experience in medicine, confessed to succumbing to the pressure to take on extra workload:

The other issue is that I'm not officially on the training program at the moment and I'm applying to get on the program. And to say - before you get on the training program - that "I think 96 rostered hours and then an extra 30 or 40 hours a fortnight is unreasonable", well that would be career suicide, probably ... If you want to get into a training program you need to keep your nose clean and your mouth shut!

Gretel was one who resisted this workload pressure from senior medical staff in the hospital, but she was in the unusual position of wanting a training place outside of the hospital - in a psychiatric facility - and hence had less need for their support.

I tried very hard to arrange my rosters so I didn't have to work 7 days straight - or tried to get a full weekend off. ...I knew I wanted to specialise in Psych so [there was] not as much pressure for me as for some people. For people who wanted to do physicians' or surgical training that was more of an issue.

Covering for your peers

In addition to their rostered hours, doctors are expected to 'cover' for each other in the case of sickness or other leave. David, a registrar, explains how his on-call demands can escalate because of this customary way of resolving staff shortages:

If another registrar is away, instead of 1 in 5 nights on-call you do 1 in 4. Or if there is a surgical conference and two or three of the registrars are away then you go on to 1 in 2 or 1 in 3.

At one level this can be seen as a straightforward instance of mutual self-interest, since the expectation is that the favour will be repaid at some time. However the other side of this 'cover' arrangement is that there is unspoken pressure not to take sick leave, as Karen explains:

And that unspoken pressure - its not that anybody says to you 'we don't want you to take your sick leave' - it's just the knowledge that - you know what its like when somebody else takes sick leave - if you take sick leave somebody else is going to have to do your work for you, and everybody is going to be stretched and everybody is going to be under more stress, there is a pressure not to take it. So you will often find quite unwell doctors at work, because they don't feel that they are able to take sick leave, because there is no provision in their hours and no provision in the system to cover them.

Sometimes this pressure results in horrific workloads. Karen describes of her experiences as an overworked intern at examination time; the pressures were intense, but the logic was inescapable:

I did five on-call shifts - which was three 24 hours and two 13-hour nightshifts - in the ten days before my exam. I was just exhausted. ... There wasn't any option. We had new people there who couldn't cover night shift, we had consultants who were sick or on annual leave and who weren't available; and it wasn't as if I was the only person in the department working a lot of hours. And there was a lot of dissatisfied people and there was a lot of tension within the dept. And that happens all the time, that hospital departments run so close to the wire in terms of the commitments they have to fulfill, that if there's any pressure put on that or somebody's away or on long-service leave, all of a sudden you've got less than the minimum number of staff to provide for commitments that don't change.

Professional culture

As in other occupations and industries in this study, this accommodation to budget pressure becomes institutionalised in the professional culture of the medical staff: doctors internalise a philosophy/mindset that allows excessive workloads and ensures that the hospital system actually functions. As David comments:

It's an institutionalised thing in surgery that you do these hours.

The ideology of professional dedication?

Besides these quite practical pressures there is evidence of a culture of overwork amongst doctors that goes beyond the needs of the hospital or its patients. Thus sometimes this culture of accommodation appears to be generalised into a professional self-image by which doctors are characterised as absolutely 'dedicated' to their patients and their profession. They then use this as a moral high ground to pressure more junior doctors to take on work overloads - or risk being labeled as 'not dedicated enough'. As Gretel, a psychiatric RMO observes:

Typically in medicine, medicine is the main focus of your life; so if you are a dedicated doctor, you will want to live, eat & breathe work. And that if you want to have a life outside medicine, that means you're not committed, you're not dedicated. I think it is changing a bit, but certainly that is the feeling from a lot of your consultants and even registrars. Partly, we did it, so you have to do it; and also it meant you're not dedicated. OK you couldn't sort of be wanting to work efficiently and be dedicated the hours you were there, but have a life outside medicine. If that wasn't your life, then you weren't dedicated enough - it was that kind of culture.

Budget pressure:

Clearly these moral pressures on medical staff workload also need to be seen in the context of hospitals' patient numbers and funding (which in the public sector is always a matter of dispute). Thus the custom of doctors 'covering' each other for sick and other absence is itself a cover for the fact that such arrangements would be unnecessary if hospitals were adequately funded, as Karen explains:

And that happens all the time, that hospital departments run so close to the wire in terms of the commitments they have to fulfil, that if there's any pressure put on that or somebody's away or on long-service leave, all of a sudden you've got less than the minimum number of staff to provide for commitments that don't change.

'You don't take your sick leave'

Similarly, the pressure not to take sick leave is also a by-product of budget considerations:

I think there's an unspoken pressure on medical staff not to take sick leave ... and it relates to the fact that if you take sick leave, the people who are still there - and its right across all medical disciplines - the people who are there will be stretched to cover you. There is no release in the system - again because of the money - to cover sick leave; it just means that other people have to work harder.

Fixing the problem?

Reduced hours?

These doctors want to work fewer hours - for themselves and their families. However this should not be at the cost of reduced income, as Elinor points out:

40 hours a week would be fine, but at an intern's pay that's really not a very good income. So it's balancing time and income. ...I think the award should improve the financial remuneration. I mean, I'm earning as much as ... an unskilled labourer, and yet I've done six years of medicine - and I can get struck off if I make a mistake. So that's where a lot of changes need to be made.

The times are certainly unsatisfactory, but if you cut the hours on the current rate of pay, you'd have interns and that on social service benefits!

After hours work/on call hours:

Secondly, as Gretel argues, there has to be some kind of control on on-call hours and shift rosters:

In a big public hospital someone has to be there after hours, so unless you, you know, had a whole lot of interns that just worked those after hours times...

Someone has to work those times and I think it's reasonable for interns to be on that roster some of the time but not as much as they are. If you're working, you work 8-5 and everyone went home and the night doctors didn't come on until 8 or 10, then there are going to be emergencies in those intervening 3 or 5 hours. Someone has to cover; it just has to be done better than it's done now. It's reasonable to do some after hours work but I think it should be rostered in a different way so it's not so frequent and that it's spaced out better. I had times I had a week of after hours work and then within ten days you might do 6 or 7 of the covers of the long shifts; so it's not the hours in the month, but the way they're spaced out as well sometimes it's a bit odd.

More flexible arrangement of hours?

Finally, as David argues, there should be days or mornings off to compensate for working longer hours or being on call:

My issue would be if we are going to work 130 hours a fortnight, we should be able to have days off during the week - and I think that's what the next award will do: we'll actually have the day off after you're on call or the day after that....

And I think rather than I think having 8 hours off I would rather be sort of prefer to be rostered to start at 12 or where you have an afternoon list that starts at 12.30 or one o'clock. And after I've been on call overnight I would much rather I had a morning off and be told don't bother coming in till 12.30 or something like that; then that would give me an opportunity during the week to either take my kids to childcare or - if it was the day when my wife and kids weren't going to work and childcare - then I could be at home.

Overall, then, doctors and their families want four things changed about their working hours - fewer hours, more predictable hours, longer breaks between shifts and compensating leave breaks. Karen speaks for many doctors when she says:

I think if I had a wish list, I'd like to see some hard and fast rules relating to number of days off after night shift and the number of times that you can shift from a day to a night roster and back again in a particular period; because ... clearly evidence shows that

those sort of switching rosters and intermittent cycling rosters have a much more significant effect on an individual's ability to cope with stress and maintain their sleep requirements.

The culture of medicine

A change in the way that a professional work ethic compels doctors to fill in the gaps left in the system by inadequate funding is difficult but essential:

The hardest thing is the culture of the workplace ... Towards the end of my surgery rotation [they brought in changes to address the long working hours issue], somebody high up decided that interns didn't have to work on Sundays. ... Even though that happened in theory, there was huge pressure from the registrars who didn't like it all who had that thing "well we did it, you're not dedicated" and basically pressured to come in anyway; and they kicked up, they didn't want to do bloods and do sort of tasks they thought were beneath them. And it became hard, because people initially sort of stood up to it saying ... so I'm not going to do it. And what happened was that the registrars basically didn't do the job properly on the Sunday, so you come to work on the Monday with basically everything in a mess - because the registrars were slack or got pissed off because the interns weren't there. And so some people then thought it's easier to go to work anyway on the Sunday because at least things aren't in so much of a mess on the Monday.

Sometimes, even if the rules or regulations are changed, the culture (of the hospital) is so slow to change there is still pressure coming from the registrars or at times consultants or something who are kicking up a fuss to put the pressure on you - even if the regulations change. Even with the IR regulations and stuff it's still going to be hard, but certainly without that it's not going to change.

Family Vs work:

At the moment, doctors have to make a choice between work and family. Karen puts the issue with clarity:

I think that most trainees find that trying to study fulltime with the demands of their work - particularly if they are in a family setting - means that they've got two choices:

either they abdicate their family responsibilities (which a lot of the males will admit that they've done in the past - and they've not seen their kids for a twelve month period, effectively) or they fail their exams; and if you fail your exams you have to do it again, and so the cycle goes on.

Service Vs Training:

Secondly, hospital administrations are forced to make choices between their training and service obligations. As discussed earlier, service needs naturally come first, and the doctors suffer - either from reduced training opportunities or from the extra hours needed to complete training requirements. Karen describes the problem - and the solution:

Also from the anesthetist's perspective, there are also college requirements for levels of training, so at each level in your training (it's a 5 year program) there's a college requirement that you will get a certain amount of teaching - there will still be input from senior people into how you are practicing. Now if the hospital has not enough staff and a lot of service commitments, then in order to fulfill the training requirements the only option is to increase hours. And unfortunately, what that 's meant is that over the last five years we've just seen that training's suffered, they've cut back training because they have to provide the service requirements. ...

It's a huge conflict [between service and training provision], because there's very little direct benefit [in training] for the hospital system and for the overall health system. There's no direct benefit by providing training, the benefits are long term, in terms of competence of staff and their ability to provide a service in future. But the fact that there's no direct benefit has meant that it has just been squeezed out.

I think that work patterns should be dictated by individual service and training requirements, and they should be designed to incorporate both.

The implications for women

Lastly, the issue of gender is also central to a resolution of the work/family conflict regarding hours. Some discussion focused on discrimination against women in the medical profession, as Karen points out:

Traditionally - I could list off a number of anecdotal stories of women who found it much harder than their male counterparts to get into various surgical disciplines - there has been an element of distrust by senior colleagues, that 'why should we take on these women if they're just going to go off and get pregnant and they're not going to be able to fulfill their commitments?'

She tells the following story as an illustration of this prejudice against women:

One surgical registrar who was pregnant, during one of her orthopedic rotations, who developed pre-eclampsia at 35 weeks and was told that she basically had to stop work - and she was told by her senior colleagues, that there was absolutely no way that they could tolerate her stopping work, and that they certainly couldn't tolerate her stopping work for five weeks. And then she said she had to stop work because she had pre-eclampsia there was no choice but to stop work, and she was basically told well if she was going to have five weeks off then she could forget having time off after she had had her baby - and that she would be expected to be straight back at work. And she was straight back at work; and there was no question [about it]. She was still trying to get onto a particular surgical training program at the time, and she'd had trouble getting on to that program, and for a whole lot of reasons - that had to do with politics and nothing to do with her - but she had no choice but to play by the rules. ...This would be some years ago, now; she's now finished her training.

However, as Karen herself admitted, this system is slowly changing as the profession is joined by more women - and by men who prioritise their families:

I think there are a lot of people who are now senior colleagues in surgery who have had family responsibilities and who perhaps have a better understanding. I think that some of the problems that traditionally women have had are actually problems that men who want to work in a flexible plus/minus part time environment are also facing. Interestingly, however, the conflict has become more generalised into discriminatory practice against doctors who prioritise their family life - whether male or female. As David describes it, somewhat ironically the prejudice currently tends to be directed against men:

There needs to more provision - not just the female - there's lip service in surgery that you can do part-time advanced training, and I know of a case where a male registrar was told that if he intended to do part-time training or take a year off, then he would need not to bother to come back to training. ... Because one of the girls in his training

program had decided she was doing it and he was told there was no way he was doing it. ... My interpretation of that is that we'll let this particular person do part-time training or take a year off because she's a girl, and its not going to be acceptable from a male.

The option of part-time work is clearly one way of resolving the work/family issue, but equally clearly it is difficult for hospitals to organise and for medical trainees to obtain, as Karen points out:

And there a lot of female doctors who are choosing to delay child-bearing because they believe that part time training is bloody difficult to organise.

There is a lot of pressure in the hospital system - and this comes from not the medical people and not the departments themselves, but from the hospital and the actual bureaucratic departments - who refuse to make part-time work easily available. The hoops that you've got to jump through to organise a part-time position are just prohibitive. The hospitals just don't like people who work part time because they're much more difficult to administrate than just the fulltime employees. So they wont go out of their way to facilitate part time employment; if you can find somebody with whom you can job share, then alright, that wont be a problem, but they wont advertise part time positions, they wont make them available and a lot of women - and men who want to work part time - particularly women who perhaps would like to have children and have the option of working part time - just find that its such a hassle and its so difficult to organise and takes so long to organise, that its easier just to say 'I'll put off having children for five years.

CHAPTER 14 Electricians and the reduction in working hours

Electricians working on large construction sites formed our group of electrician interviewees. We worked from this group because they have changed their working time arrangements over recent years following a union decision and campaign to cap overtime at 10 hours per week. Thus these interviews form a strong contrast with others in this study, in that they report the effects of a shift to controlled, contained working hours, following years of very long hours for many individuals. This case therefore provides some insight into how a reduction in working hours can affect family life. We interviewed six workers and one partner. While several had experience in a range of sectors, most were employed in construction on large sites.

The interviewees are working around 49 hours per week now, compared to much longer working weeks prior to negotiation of new standards. While not accepted initially by all workers in the industry – some of whom wanted to keep earning high levels of overtime income - this change has affected individuals, families and children in positive ways. It represents a ‘good hours story’ for families. However, the interviewees talk about reasonable hours and reasonable pay – and their close connection. They discuss how a reduction in hours would not have been acceptable to at least some in the industry without the background of steadily increasing take home ordinary pay. The ETU has achieved reasonable hours on the back of reasonable pay, so the interviewees were happy to accept the cap. Furthermore, the union is able to ensure adherence to the cap on hours through active membership involvement and education, although there was some initial resistance from some. They also talk about attitudinal change amongst employees. These changes took place in the presence of a strong union with wide membership coverage: once agreed at a general members meeting in late 1999 the union was strongly behind a cap on hours and has assisted members to ensure its implementation. These employees work alongside concreters, carpenters, and other building workers who do not enjoy capped overtime and who continue to regularly work over 56 hours a week.

Both plumbers (who have an 8 hour overtime limit) and electricians have rostered days off, leisure days and flexibility in their annual leave.

What long hours do to individual electricians

Tim describes the effects he witnessed and experienced while working on a large construction project. He worked in a section where they might work an extra four hours a night and Saturday, but not as much as elsewhere where they were doing 12 hour days, and weekends.

Prior to [1997 I worked] at [this site]. That was no holds barred. People were working twelve hour days. Saturday. Sunday...and after the first two weeks, if that ...they were sort of walking zombies by about Wednesday, Thursday of fatigue, and you could just see that they were slowing down. And they were doing it for months. And you could see they were wrecked.

Currently he is working at another large site. The employers obviously still have deadlines to meet within the 10 hours limit so things have to be arranged differently:

They realise now there is an overtime limit and so they've sort of built that in... companies now know they can't cram the job at the end....They know that there's a limit so they sort of rather than being real dry with guys at the start and having you know 10 trying to do it, they'll put 15 to keep up with things and carry it along. With the limits, when its near the end they can sometimes get an exemption for a Sunday, or a couple of hours, but generally, now they know there's a limit [on overtime] they put in their program.

Tim feels that the hours are more predictable now, that employers have to plan so the workload tends to be more constant and evenly spread out.

Our hours now, you can pretty much assume now that you do the week and Saturday.

'His kid doesn't want to see him'

In past jobs Tim has seen the effects of long hours in fellow workers that lead to safety risks as well as effects on family life:

Toward the end of the day, they are not as alert, and when you are dealing with people working on cranes it is a bit of a hazard... That's work-wise. Home-wise... I know this one particular person who works every [overtime] amount there is and he's the first there, last to go sort of thing. He's a carpenter, and there's another carpenter I know and he leaves 3.30pm - goes home. And they were talking about their kids. And the guy who leaves early was saying when he gets home, his kid can't wait to see him, you know. And the other guy who's never at home said, he was amazed, because when he gets home, the kid runs away. But he's, I guess, so far with the work he doesn't realise -

doesn't twig - his kid doesn't want to see him. He probably says to his mum, 'Who's that guy who comes here every night?' ... you hear things like that.

'You basically became a zombie'

Cam describes the effect of working long hours over an extended period. For two years he worked on a central city site:

One of the biggest jobs in the city at the time. We were doing some incredible hours there. I was involved in a lot of hours. A lot of Sundays and Saturdays and weeknights, purely because of the way the job was going. It had to be done basically. And you were there to do it. So it did take its toll. Fatigue set in. You basically became a zombie at some stages you know, when you were doing 12 hour days, 6 or 7 days a week, but you wouldn't be 12 hour days everyday. But I know guys who have - and done longer hours, so it just becomes out of control. And that becomes a way of life for you in the end, where it takes over. And I know it's broken up quite a few families.

Like others in this study Cam had been inclined to think that missing out on the early years of his children's lives 'wasn't critical'. However, in retrospect he is not so sure:

It was pretty constant, almost from the word go. So we were putting in some incredible hours. Look, thinking back to the times we did that, as I said the money was really good, but when you look back in retrospect it takes its toll on your life. With losing leisure time, losing family life. My kids were a lot younger then, so it wasn't as critical but they grow up so quickly, that time you can never get back. And it's priceless, I think.

Cam describes how the long hours affected attitudes to safety:

Because of the long hours I think after doing so many, you don't think clearly anymore. You get to a certain stage where you're just there and you're doing a job and you're really not thinking as clearly as you should be. And that's where it becomes dangerous as well on the safety side of things where restrictions were a lot more lenient than as far as working on live components. We've changed now. The safe guards are a lot stricter than what they were back then. And you can imagine the pressure of the job and working longer hours - to get things done, you're going to take short cuts. And when you're working long hours, hazards are going to happen.

He discusses an example:

I guess it would be probably partly laziness and tiredness of working those hours, where instead of going to turn off a [switch] board - and you might have to go up to another area to do it and tag it off - you think, 'oh, I'll do it live', right, instead. So the hazards were always there... That's what I was talking about the zombie state, where I was talking about. You're thinking is diminished and you just don't think clearly when you've worked those sort of hours... it really takes its toll on you.

Ian agrees that productivity is negatively affected by fatigue:

I've been lucky enough not to see any major accidents or anything happen, but I've seen people mope around, or maybe hit their finger with a hammer, or drop something, they're just lethargic. They don't know where they're going, they walk into a room to get something and forget what they need to get. That happens normally, but to them it happens a lot more... So really the productivity isn't there for them, 'cause they're not there. Once you're been at work that long, your mind just isn't there.

In Jake's view, a cap on overtime has brought about a change in employees and the workplace, one that affects depression, productivity and families' capacity to plan:

Yeah, because over a period of time when people do those hours it leads to, well you're knackered all the time, naturally leads to some sort of depression, and even working, 6 days straight it gets to you. Even working 6 days out of 7, it's a lot of time to spend at work. And you can tell with the guys, we've just had the two day weekend, we had the Sunday and Monday, because we had the RDO and the guys are chirpier, refreshed, they've had a good weekend, and they're into it the next week. Now they look forward to not this week, but the following one, where they have five days off... And they get to plan their lives. They know they've got five days off coming and they'll go away, whereas in the past you plan something and if you weren't one to say no you'd have to cancel your plans if you had to go to work. It sort of gives people the opportunity to plan their lives.

What long hours do the families of electricians

Long hours were a particular problem for those with families. Men spoke about the need to create a relationship with their children or spend time with them, or give their wife a break from constant childcare responsibilities.

Ada, the partner of Raphael, finds that his reduced hours mean that she is able to be more flexible in her own arrangements for paid work. She works part-time about 10 hours a week, working around his hours, like so many other partners of long hours workers. She also notices that Raphael has been able to develop a much better relationship with the children – twins who are now at school and a three year old. She commented that her memory of the long hours time is ‘a blurr’ because the children were very young and they were doing ‘so much at the time’. She didn’t like Raphael working 7 days, but ‘it was a means to an end’ in terms of earning an income and getting ahead in terms of the mortgage. ‘We just had to work around it and do it’. Like many other families, when he was working long hours and she was working too, her mother-in-law ‘had to’ help with the childcare.

Raphael leaves for work early but is usually now home at around 4.30pm. His hours are now 7am-3.30pm (Mon-Fri), 6am-1.30pm Saturday. He generally works on Saturdays staying just under the cap of 10 hours overtime a week. In Ada’s view, it is good to have him home on the weekends at least on Sunday’s now so that the family can have time together. If she is working on Sunday it gives him the opportunity to have the children to himself. Now they are able to have family outings, be at home together, and to arrange holidays. When he was working 7 days, with his rostered day off he would usually only want to catch up with sleep and rest. Now he is able to spend time with the children when he comes home, and they are able to spend “good quality time together”.

Raphael is also clear about this improvement. Before the cap took effect, Raphael on his last job worked 12-hour shifts for 7 days a week for 2 months to finish the project. Added to the actual working day was travel time:

When you’ve worked 12 hours, and you’ve got a young family and get home, the last thing you feel like doing is muck around with the kids or on a Saturday afternoon you can’t be bothered doing anything. When you get home you’re always narky with your missus. You’re knackered. You start at 7 o’clock in the morning and we live in the Eastern suburbs, it’s 45 minutes away and your alarm goes off at 5am and you do a 12-hour day. You’re not home before 8.30pm. Your body can only do so much.

Some of the blokes wanted a beer after work, but Raphael went home. If work was close he would get back at 7.30pm but the children would already be in bed – and the long term effects of this pattern of hours could be read in the marital breakups around him:

While money's good, but you've got to weigh up whether having a life or – some guys take the money. That's how marriages break down. Your wife might have young kids and she can't look after them while you're at work all day. They need a bit of a break as well. I said to my wife, 'let me know if it gets too much and I won't do the hours'. Some blokes don't think about it like that.

Murray believes that the cap was introduced for three reasons: because of 'failing marriages and workplace injuries' and 'to spread the work around': 'It's better to employ 2 blokes for 40 hours a week than 1 bloke for 80.'

Jake points to the marital effects of long hours on his site:

Just on my project I'd say within my work group, we've got about 30-40 electricians that are there, and 6-7 that are divorced or going through divorces, and one of the things they kind of say [affected them] is all the hours they used to work, to pay the mortgage off, to support their kids through school and all that sort of stuff.

Raphael agreed that there were a lot of marriage breakdowns in the industry because of the long hours. These hours tended to really 'get out of hand' toward the end of the job. Nonetheless, 'breaking' the culture of long hours, and the desire for the high earning is not always easy:

There'd be penalties and overtime, 12 hours, 7 days a week and it would be getting out of hand. A lot of other industries still do that where there's fellas working 10 hours a day 6-7 days a week and used to do it and getting the money each week and if you told them you were going to cap them they'd string you up basically. They're used to doing it. They're happy to make that money.

When Raphael was single it was one thing, but he's got twins and a younger child now:

If you're going to miss the kids or miss work, I know which one I'd pick.

Every 4 weeks they now have a long weekend and for Raphael, this means more predictable family time: with the three days off every month the family can go away, for example, to his

parent's beach house. He still finds it too difficult to play competitive sports with his regular weekend work.

Ian describes a relentless cycle of work/sleep/eat/work in the period where he worked long hours:

Just to get home while it's still daylight and scrub the kids and take them to the park, let them have a run around, or take them to the shops or take them to friends, go visit family. There was none of that. You end up like a hermit, a recluse... People go, 'oh, and what have you been up to?' and it's just work, that's all you can say, 'what have you been up to?', 'work' and it just becomes depressing and day in day out, and just builds up, builds up and you don't know it 'cause you're just at work the whole time.

And if you're not at work you're either cleaning up, you're doing the basic maintenance you have to do around your home, cutting the grass and doing bits and pieces and... when you actually sit back and see 'what have I been doing?', there's no quality of life. Life goes on, time's is ticking away everyday, day after day, year after year, and you've got nothing to look forward to. There's no goal, there's no time, there's no interaction with other people, too, you know. You're just stuck in the house, work, home, shower, eat, sleep, wake up, work and its just like a vicious cycle and it just starts going bad. It just builds up. (Ian, electrician)

Cam describes how life was before for him - in terms that are almost identical to Ian's description of the relentless work cycle:

You didn't have any leisure time. You were basically going home, eating, having a shower and going to sleep. That was your leisure time. Have a bit of a chat and you're too tired to do anything else. So that was life for a while.

Cam supported the cap on hours, for the sake of his family:

Basically I needed a family life. I put the family before anything to be quite honest, and that's where it came about.

It was the effect on his children that really pulled Cam up and encouraged him to rethink his hours of work:

The kids commented at one stage, which is what really caused an awakening for me. They said, they said to me, and their mother, all I ever do is work, and then I thought, 'they're right'. And I had a look at myself, sort of stepped back a bit and reassessed the values. And that's when I started restricting myself and since this limit came in, it's basically done it for everyone.

Interviewer: So what your children said had a big impact on you?

Yeah, for sure. And I could see what they said was right. I wasn't home a great deal, I was always working and before the shit hit the fan I pulled my head in and started looking at my life, so that's where it stood. You've also got to take into account, being on those jobs for a year and a half, two years, or whatever it might be, you were sort of in there for a quick buck so to speak. You get in, you get out, because you don't know what the future might hold. And that's part of the reason as well.

Interviewer: Did you talk with your wife about your hours?

I did. There was a [financial] goal there. A light at the end of the tunnel. But like I said, after the kids said something like that, it sort of changed my view of things and we sort of learned to survive with normal working life, or what I would call normal working life anyway. It's still currently going on anyway with other unions. Pretty much unlimited overtime...

Cam is now able to play golf, go fishing and takes his kids fishing. However, while Cam is pleased about the cap on overtime he points out that he still works long hours that are not ideal in his view:

I'm still working 6 days a week most of the time, which means 8 hours extra, which basically means you're getting one day off a week, which means you're catching up on things around the house, or you get to visit someone which just didn't happen before. But 6 days a week is still too much I reckon. But that's the nature of the beast.

He believes that employers have fixed goals and that employees have to make sure that standards are fair and enforced:

When it comes down to the crunch the boss doesn't give a shit if your family life is affected or not. They want the job done. They want to make their money. The guys want to make their money as well, but it's at a cost, it is at a price. If you are working unreasonable hours you pay the price, somewhere along the line. Family life, social life, fatigue. They could end up dead...

Ian has a similar positive picture of how fewer hours have affected him, his relationship and his kids, and he contrasts what his parents did, and what he wants now:

There were five kids in my family [when I grew up], so there was a fair bit of money that was needed to come in, to feed us, clothe us and do all that. And I thought 'Nah, I want to enjoy my quality of life because my parents didn't have it'. They did it hard so I could have it easy, and I thought, 'Nup, I want to have it a bit easier for my wife and my kids'.

Interviewer: Have you noticed a difference in the family now?

Yeah I have. I come home. The wife is chirpier. She's not stressing out, you know, 'cause a lot got put on her, 'cause I'm not home, I'm always out and about.

Ian's children have also noticed a difference, which he values highly:

Yeah, especially with the little boy. The little girl, she's just a happy chappie, but the little boy, I found he wasn't as close to me, he wouldn't..., now when I come home he just drops everything and runs straight for me, where before - I'd come in at 8, 7, 6, whatever time - there just wasn't that closeness. Now when I do grab him, when I do come home from work, and go to the park or go to the shops, I mean they can't wait to come up to me and that's worth any money or any amount of overtime, or anything.

The effect on electrician's relationships

Ian recognised the stress that his long hours put on his relationship – and in the end he felt he had to choose:

So I was [traveling] all over the place, putting a lot of stress on my family life. And we got to a point, [where if] I'd kept on at that job I wouldn't have had a wife or kids in the same household, so I went back to regular work, you know, now while the children are pretty young.

He understood that his hours also meant long lonely hours for his wife – which took her to breaking point. His hours – and ‘being buggared’ - made even conversation about the situation difficult.

I think a lot of the pressure went on her cooped up in the house with two kids. And 'cause I wasn't home I couldn't do the bits and pieces around the house, go to the bank... Sometimes all she needed was a half an hour to leave the kids with me, just to get out and not have them in her ear, 'cause as little kids, they're, 'mum, mum, mum, mum,' and that's non-stop from when they wake up, til when they go to bed. I found that she was going around the bend when I was doing all those hours. I could see she was close to breaking point even.

Interviewer: Did you talk about those things together?

Well I wasn't home really to talk about it and when I was, I was buggared. And she was buggared 'cause she was – didn't really get a chance.

Eventually he took action:

I came home and I said, 'Hon, I've pulled the pin' and she said, 'well is that what you wanted to do? You know, you do what you want to do', and I said, 'Yeah, that's my call and that's it, that's how its going to be' and she just laid a big kiss on me lips. So that's it. She didn't have to say anything else.

It was not only electricians with families who appreciated less overtime. Jake is single and values his extra time for hobbies:

Interviewer: So why is it important for you not to work those hours?

I always have something better to do! I've always been sports oriented. I'd play golf, soccer, all that sort of stuff. Go to the races. Friday night, POET'S afternoon... go for a drink with a few of the guys.

The effect on electrician's social life

Tim describes the effect on his social life when he was supervising construction of a supermarket. His tiredness after long hours meant that he was glad he wasn't in a relationship, "Just as well really! [laughs]":

I was running the job and there wasn't enough people on the job. So the blokes that were there were expected to work. And I just said to them, 'look, the boss-man wants this to be done by such and such a date. Work the hours you want, or the hours you feel you can work, and if we get it done we get it done, and if not that's their bad luck sort of thing'...

I'd leave [home] real early to beat the traffic and be there at six and just set up things and get things ready. And there was probably between 8 and 16 people there at different times. Just keep them going. Make sure they've got everything. Make sure they're doing everything safely. Coordinate everything. And by the time they've finished up, I was probably leaving at 6 o'clock.

When you get home, you have something to eat, takes probably an hour to get home, have something to eat, shower. Wash. Too tired to do anything. Just go to bed. And that was the way it went. Some days on Saturday and Sunday we'd work when there was a problem for 14 hours. Things like that... The only time you had a break was on an RDO, rostered day off, and we wouldn't work, which on that particular job, was every second Monday. So that day was pretty much a waste. Bit of a wreck.

And I remember coming home and friends and a brother was going to another mate's joint to watch a video. And I got there, had something to eat. It was about 8 o'clock, put the video on and I woke up when the credits were finishing and I went home and that was it! Basically for that 6 months it was just - you might see people at night, once or twice a fortnight or something. If you're lucky. Just too busy and too tired.

His hobbies were also set aside:

I race motorbikes... During that period, it didn't happen. Like there's a race once a month. So I just didn't go... I would always do things with my brothers and friends, but it would be 'I'll see. I got to work Saturday, I work Sunday, work back at night'... Which at the time, as I said, I was single and [it was] sort of part of the job. I didn't look at it as though this was complete bullshit. Excuse the French. But it didn't particularly worry me. But from now, looking back, that six months I didn't really [do anything else], I was just working.

Now, he says 'Anything I want to do with family, friends, I've got time to do it...'. Tim now has a partner.

Employer pressure: the 'choice' to work overtime in the construction industry

Each of the interviewees felt that many employees felt pressure to work long hours in the industry. For those who refused, there were consequences - such as losing their job which some had experienced personally. According to Raphael, you do have a choice in theory, 'but only to an extent':

When the work's there, the employer generally expects the work, don't they Murray? The job's got to get done. But if you say to your boss, 'it's got to the stage my wife's going to leave me', then that's a hard case...

Murray agreed that while it isn't compulsory the long hours certainly were expected – and for some created a dependence upon an 'overtime' income:

Some families, while the works there, take it to take out a mortgage, \$150 000 or whatever. They've got to work to meet their commitments whether house or car. When the work dries up, they're buggered if they still have to maintain payments, their standard of living. Or their partner might get shitty.

In Murray's experience, when overtime was worked, it was usually given with a few days notice and the employer would approach and say that a 12-hour day was available, although it was generally expected that the majority would work the time.

Cam reinforced the involuntary nature of much of the overtime work in the industry historically, while pointing out the benefits of working less hours now – despite 'some grumbles':

Construction is a pretty rigorous game and the job was going for whatever it might be - it might be 18 hours a day sometimes. There was shifts, shift work that was done, and you basically had to be there. And if they couldn't get enough labour the foreman would somehow put enough pressure on the guys to actually stay there and do the extra hours. The money was great, but leisure time is worth more... During the period of construction, if the work's being completed, we had to stay with the job, so to speak, with construction going up, walls going in, to make sure the cables were in, so it was a never-ending battle.

So the blokes were being pressured to actually stay there although they didn't want to be a lot of the time. I've seen it. They felt they had to be there, otherwise their job would be in jeopardy. That was the pressure that was put on them by foremen, so since this restriction has come in they just can't do it anymore. There's a 10-hour overtime limit. There were grumblings in the early days about restricting overtime, because they're used to the money, but now I think you'll find, conservatively speaking about 95 per cent are very happy with it, and you'll get the odd grumble. But the concept has changed, the views of people have changed over the last 3 or 4 years, they've just loved the idea of the time off, so they can plan their life.

He has personally observed – and experienced - the consequences of rejecting overtime:

I've seen it many times where the guys were feeling pressured to working overtime, purely to protect their jobs. Because, come the end of that particular construction job, they would be the first ones out the gate if they didn't do what the boss wanted basically.

Interviewer: And is that what your experience was?

[laughs] Yeah, definitely... A foreman wanted me to work back doing an area I was involved in. And basically I told him where to go in no uncertain terms. And I found myself in L. So he was basically trying to use me as an example I suppose, but speaking up at meetings, and stuff like that, voicing your opinion, doesn't do much to lengthen your career with a company and that's what happened. I ended up in L for a while, and then got the bullet from there. So I was out of work for a little while then. That's the sort of pressures that come to bear with a lot of the guys on the job.

Ian also recounted stories of penalties for refusing overtime:

I know that people who don't agree to stay back when they're told to...if they do it two or three times, they'll actually get moved off the job and sent to the yard, and from the yard they'd say, 'you're no longer needed'. The yard is the stepping stone, that's where they send you to oust you, and everyone knows that, but they'd never admit that, that's just in the industry, everybody knows. You know if you're going to the yard, you haven't got long!

He particularly mentioned workers of non-English speaking background, who he felt were vulnerable to the threat of job loss:

A lot of these people are migrants and all that and their English isn't the best, and they figure, 'well if I say no, where do I go to from here? I can't even fill out a form properly without help'. And that's the majority of people who they do sort of - I wouldn't say stand over, it is actually, it's standing over - they stand over these people because they haven't got the fluent English, they can't read and write properly, you know they figure that... 'these people are giving me the job, I'll just put up and shut up, I'll do whatever it takes'.

By contrast, Jake felt that the cap on overtime had taken some of that pressure off. Nonetheless, some employees in other occupations were still working very long hours:

One of the cultures in the construction industry was [pointing], 'Okay, you can work this overtime, you can't, you can't, you can't, you can'. They'd [the employer] pick and choose who they wanted, so it was always a certain crew who were not working or working. But these days, with respect to overtime, it's open, up to our overtime limit. If you want to come in you can, if you don't you don't have to. It's changed in that way too. You're no longer being pushed and forced to either come in or not come in....

I'd even go as far as saying that...people find it a lot easier to say no because the excuse is 'there's a cap. We can't do it'. It's actually helped people to come out of their shells and say, 'we can't do it'... Because in the past there's never been an excuse, if you like, for not doing all the overtime. Don't get me wrong. Some jobs they do monster amounts of overtime. I mean, one of the other unions on my project, it feels as though they are pouring concrete 24 hours a day.

Control over hours and work

Prior to the cap on hours, interviewees felt that – in addition to working very long hours especially near the completion of a job – they lacked control over hours. This meant that they couldn't plan their outside life including social engagements, their family events and holidays. They were frequently asked either on the day, or a couple of days ahead, to work a 12-hour day and the expectation was they generally would do so.

'It's the nature of construction industry'

This was a phrase mentioned a few times. It suggests that long hours achieve a naturalised acceptance in industry sectors, as they have in much of construction. However, the electricians experience in imposing a cap shows that there is nothing especially 'natural' about these hours. While it's seen that employers put a certain amount of pressure to finish jobs, there is an acceptance that hours are to some degree beyond anyone's control. For example, Raphael said that working Saturdays are simply necessary in the construction industry (although other electricians don't work Saturdays). Others also commented that the periodic nature of construction was inherent, ie that there would be a period of overwork followed by unemployment after the end of a job. However the exaggerated affect of that, they felt, was somewhat overcome by the 10 hour cap. Despite this, there remains an acknowledgement that the unpredictability of construction means that there is a tendency to take the work while it is there.

Changing a long hours culture: it's possible

Jake describes how initial worker resistance to fewer hours changed, partly in view of the productivity and fatigue issues:

In the first six months [after the decision to cap overtime] you'd have people saying, 'well, no. I wasn't at that meeting. I didn't vote. I can do whatever I like. You don't tell me. If I want to do 20 hours a day, I'm going to do 20 hours a day.' But it's obviously not in the interests of the company 'cause you won't be working the whole 20. You just won't be there mentally. Physically you'll be tired, you'll be a health and safety risk to everybody there on site. So there's no interest in anyone doing it. And after the initial teething and people getting used to it, I don't think people now would have it any other way. You ask any electrician in Melbourne 'what do you think of the 10 hours', and they'll put their thumbs up.

He agreed that most electricians who had cut back on overtime were 'pretty happy' about it:

You go back even four, five years ago, a lot of our membership as far as the ETU is concerned, would love to do a whole heap of overtime, or wouldn't say no to doing a whole heap of overtime. But today, they're pretty adamant that they're pretty happy to be working from 7.00 to 3.30 and come in on a Saturday to do their 8 hours which keeps them under our 10-hour overtime limit, which is what we voted for at the last EBA. And the guys consider that to be enough and it gives them enough time to spend with family, or do what they want to do. A funny story too, last week I had to ask the guys whether or not some of them wanted to come in on a day to do a change over. When I say a change over, the whole project needs to be turned off, and that means no one else can work. So it's got to be done out of hours if you like. And I was struggling to get six guys to come and do it. 'Cause they feel they don't need to do the overtime, they get paid enough to do what they have to do, and they'd rather be at home. No, it's been a huge change. And that's only happened in the last four, five years...

What capped overtime has meant for electricians

Ian is straightforward in his assessment of how the change affects him – although it took time for him to acclimatise to more time for himself and his family:

I think it's brilliant. It was a bit strange in the beginning with all your free time when you were at home and not doing all that enormous amount of overtime and you'd just feel stressed and you'd come home and the actual long hours would impact on your family life. 'Cause you'd come home and you wouldn't feel in the mood for anything 'cause you'd just done all these hours at work and all you wanted to do was relax, and then the wife wants - she's been in the house with the kids all day - so she wants to hand over the kids and you aren't in the mood and then she gets upset and then that's how the family conflict starts. But like this, I'm at home at a decent hour and I get to spend time with the kids. Now, once they go to school then I won't get to see them as much

because they'll have their own friends. So while their still infants or little children I get to enjoy that bit of family life.

Ian describes the industry changes since his apprentice years, reflecting on the cost for his family along with the costs for those who could not get any hours in the industry:

Well I started when I was 16 as an apprentice back in 85 and you'd get a Saturday every now and then. As I went along with my apprenticeship it got busier, busier, they want you to stay back 10 hours, 6 days a week, and obviously that impacted on your home life, your friends. I wasn't married then so it didn't really matter too much. And then there was a lull in the industry, or here there was in Melbourne anyway... where I couldn't even get a job. And there was no over-time limit and the people who did have a job were working all these hours and there was a whole heap of unemployment... So in the mid-90s when it started picking up that's when the movement people said 'well now there's plenty of work out there, let's share it, instead of few doing all those hours and impacting on them'...

Well it wasn't easy in the beginning, they still wanted you to do the hours and they'd say 'well why can't you do it?' and [I'd say] 'oh well, there was this mass meeting of all the electricians in Melbourne, and it was brought up there, and everybody voted on it.' So even the bosses can't say 'can you do more, come on', and also the union's got the right to go through the time and wages records of the companies' in their enterprise bargaining agreement, so there's less companies willing to push people to do those extra hours because they can be caught out very easily.

Ian was very supportive of the cap on hours, not only because of the time for family but especially in light of his own experience of unemployment:

By the time I'd finished my trade there was nothing out there. I knew a few people who were doing 16 hours a day and I thought that was just ridiculous. So I was all for [the cap], and it's actually worked for me. Because I've got two young children and to get home at a normal time of day when they are still awake, you know, can't be nothing but a good thing I think.

He was also aware of the costs for his life, even before he was married:

We were doing 10-12 hours a day and you just get home and by the time you shower up and have something to eat, it was time to go to bed and then go back to work again. It was just this vicious cycle where, when you actually do get to the Sunday when you don't work, you actually sleep it off... and you lose your social life and your friends, it just goes out the window, just quality of life goes out the window.

These effects became more complicated when he had children and a partner and was still working long hours, while in a different job:

Well just the kids go to bed 8, 8.30pm or something, and...you get home and they're in bed and you don't even see your kids, you see them once a week on the Sunday, or on the Saturday. And that puts a lot of stress on the other partner. Because they're cooped up in the house all day with the kids so they can't wait for you to come home. Like I do now at a godly hour, look after the kids, and she can hop in the car and do the shopping or something, or just go out and have a breather.

'Spreading the work around'

While some electricians were inundated with work, others were searching for work. The interviewees feel that the work is now more evenly shared as a result of the overtime cap. Tim described his experience:

With the shorter hours it's created more employment and I know that for a fact on this job...Now that we all work the same 40 hours and a Saturday, there's a lot more people who need to be employed... and because [the employer] knows they can't put a lot of overtime on at the end of the job, they will employ more people and basically you'll get your week and a Saturday. Whereas in the past you might just have you're forty hours, forty hours, forty hours, forty hours, you know, and then they'll sack you and then the last people that are left will get eighty hours a week. So by putting limits on it, you're basically make it so that most people in the industry will have their forty hours, and if they want to work the extra, they can work that extra Saturday...

He points to specific employment effects – which are tested by employers on a regular basis, and require restatement and defence:

So what they've had to do is employ more electricians so instead of there being three electricians there's now five. And that's just one case. And contractors... have said 'is

this the overtime limit?' they ...try and bend it and we've said, 'well no, it was voted by the blokes and that's what it is,' you know. And then they said, 'well, we'll have to bring a couple more guys here too, so they can finish the job and keep up to scratch'. So it is working.

Tim's description of the fluctuating patterns of hours suggests that long hours for intermittent unpredictable periods creates a thirst for the long hours 'when you can get them' because of the uncertainty of work into the future. While employers might seek to intensively work small groups of workers to meet completion dates, the costs for workers in terms of shorter periods of very long hours, followed by unemployment are high:

I think that in our industry, depending what job... if you've just started to work on this job and they say to you, 'we need you to work these hours', there's a good chance people will do it 'cause they don't know how long it's going to be. We generally get the sack at the end of jobs if there's not enough work. That's the nature of the industry. So, if the work's there, people will do it, and because the next job they might have to wait three months for the next job to come around.

But as it is now where there is an overtime limit, it's shortened those periods in between where there's no one picking up people. And it's lengthened the job too because they need people. Rather than it being, 'right, everyone get in here. Work 20 hours extra, finish it, now get lost'. Now it's sort of, they realise they've got to structure it better...There's definitely more work around. I don't mean more buildings going up, I mean they need more people employed.

I guess it's changed. How it used to be, was the job would slowly start off, and it would work up, and there'd be say 50 people and it would drop back to 35, and then it would come toward the end of the job and it would sky rocket up to 60 blokes, and then within the next month, there'd be two. So it'd go like that. Whereas now, you get more blokes earlier and it goes along bit more stable, because they know that peak at the end - they would cram all those people in at the end and do overtime, and finish the job off.

What would help?

Jake feels that it would be useful to get a definition of unreasonable hours into the award:

For starters, if it's in the award, it's written in black and white. There's that legal obligation for people to adhere to it and it gives some people the reason not to work all this overtime, because something is there. That's why I feel the cap's helped our people... because there's that reason not to do it.

He also believes that it is important that other issues that impact on unreasonable hours are included, namely the number of hours without a break, time off between breaks, and health and safety standards.

Electricians provide an example, through these experiences of an industry that has long been permeated by long hours – a ‘no holds barred’ hours culture with many working very long weeks. While these threatened life in some situations, they were persistently worked - and still are by many occupational groups. Nonetheless, a change in the hours regime has been possible for a sub-group of workers in the industry. Its success relies on membership involvement in seeing that the new standard is enforced. And overwhelming the stories of workers and partners in this occupational group are positive about the effects upon their lives, their relationships, their children and their participation in their communities – whether through sport, hobbies, friendships or extended families.

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APPENDIX: Research Protocols