



Ambulance Employees Association of Western Australia



SOC Acoustic Shock Survey Results

Participants surveyed March 2nd, 2021 to March 20th, 2021

Over the past 16-months there have been numerous reports relating to acoustic shock incidents and acoustic shocks occurring within the State Operations Centre (SOC). Employees have reported injuries from perforated ear drums to headaches and severe jaw pain, along with ear irritations. The AEAWA have contacted WorkSafe WA on numerous occasions as a result of employee complaints and the employer St John Ambulance Western Australia (SJA) to date being unable to find the cause of these incidents.

The AEAWA conducted an employee survey with a participation rate of 34.4% (n=30); of which 56.6% (n=17) employees stated they had received an acoustic shock as a result of using SJA equipment. Of the respondents that had been subjected to an acoustic shock event; 93.3% (n=28) employees were working in the SOC and 8.4% (n=2) were working at the Wangara Hub. Of the 17 reported incidents, 82.3% (n=14) had occurred on radio dispatch.

Radio dispatchers make up approximately 32.1% (n=28) of the population. To put that into perspective this population have an acoustic incident prevalence of 53.5%. During the survey there were a total of 38 incidents recorded for the 17 radio dispatch participants, or 2.2 incidents per participant.

Our members within the SOC have had enough, as 93.3% (n=28) have felt unsupported by the organisation and 90% (n=27) of all surveyed SOC personnel believe the equipment they are using is unsafe. In line with this feedback 73.3% (n=22) of personnel within the communications centre would be prepared to take some sort of industrial action to force SJA into overhauling the radio equipment they believe in 'unsafe'.

This on top of the organisations appointed insurer Allianz, denying almost all workers compensation claims. Employees have had appointment after appointment cancelled by the Allianz ENT specialist. By the time employees visit this medical professional their injuries have subsided, and the claim is therefore denied. This means that any time off (which should have been covered by workers compensation) comes out of the employee's sick leave balance.

To gauge just how the employees within the SOC feel about these incidents a comment section was included in the survey; below are some of the comments left by the participants.

1. This has gone on too long. We need to be covered for workplace injuries but were not. It's disgusting. Can we please have, almost like a what to do message from you guys. As we don't know what should happen to stop us getting one or what to do or who to contact if we do receive an injury or are involved in an incident.
2. It is shocking that this is still happening and St. John's allowing their workers comp insurance Allianz to refuse to cover acoustic shock with no repercussions. I put a claim and was advised it was denied WRA and St. John not caring for this outcome. I was explained by the geriatric doctor that it's like a headache and can't be proved!
3. I have not received an acoustic shock; however, I feel the equipment we currently use is cheap and not up to standard. There is not adequate time during shift change over to test your equipment as it is common to have 000 banked up. I will support the union and my colleagues who have experienced a shock if further action is required.
4. SJA Management say they will refund us lost time, but they don't. They make it extremely hard to do.
5. It's been very upsetting watching colleagues continually get acoustic shocks and then get treated like a criminal. This is even when the shocks are so loud, I have heard them from a distance. Managers don't believe staff and disregard you when you report them. We are made to feel like it's fake when it's not. Our health has suffered time and time again and SJA really don't care about us. They seem to just hope we leave or move on or be quiet. It's just not fair and so sad.
6. I have not received an acoustic shock injury; however, I do feel our equipment is unsafe due to the fact that headsets continuously buzz for your entire shift, the phones do not ring and so in order to hear a call drop in you have to have the headset volume up very loud, which then means when people are screaming down the phone it is extremely loud.
7. Each time I filled out an incident report I never heard any further about it. It's just been accepted its part of the job and not to complain about it.
8. Are we considering issuing a PIP through the OSH process?
9. Why aren't they fixing the problem? It's because they care more about not spending money than they do their own employees.
10. There is a big bullying culture in SOC which makes it hard to bring complaints forward. The risk of ongoing unfair treatment is a massive concern.

There is a multitude of research that identifies these issues within call centres globally and many organisations have installed numerous initiatives to reduce these events, many have removed headsets all together, going for a microphone and speaker. There is, however, no recordable prevalence relating to these events. A study by Patel and Broughton (2002) across 15 call centres in the United Kingdom reviewed the noise levels staff (n=1500) were subjected to. No employee stated they had been subjected to noise levels that they would consider to be exceptionally loud, and no one had experienced noises through headsets in which issues such as ringing in the ears or episodes of dulled hearing had occurred.

To the AEAWA's knowledge these events do not seem to be occurring in the Police or Fire service call centres and if they were it is extremely doubtful, they are affecting over 50% of the employees within the room.

Many meetings have occurred with both senior and executive management, radio technicians have stated 'they have no idea where the issue(s) are, therefore they cannot fix the issue' and WorkSafe WA have been unable to get SJA to sort these issues.

It is therefore time to take the next step. The AEAWA write to you to ascertain what from a legal perspective can we do to limit these issues.

Much feedback from our colleagues is in relation to the removal of headsets for dispatchers and for the organisation to place speakers and microphones on each desk, as if the problem cannot be located, it cannot be fixed. At least by removing the headsets employees can drastically reduce acoustic injuries occurring.

We welcome your feedback.

The AEAWA



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