

# Helping road warriors at risk

When companies send staff on a trip, their duty of care requires far more than just waving goodbye.

I don't want to alarm you, but think for just one minute about all the health risks you take each time you embark on a business trip. For a start, you could pick up a stomach bug by eating or drinking something unpleasant. Or you could catch a nasty head cold after your immune system is weakened by a long-haul flight or dodgy air conditioning. And it's entirely possible that you could be in a car accident one day.

Now consider a few of the other potential medical misadventures highlighted in a recent International SOS report: heart attacks; back injuries from lifting heavy luggage; infectious diseases (dengue fever, malaria and hepatitis); and pandemics such as influenza. That's not to mention the health threats posed by natural disasters, lawlessness, riots and acts of terrorism.

This alarmingly lengthy list of unpleasant experiences is sobering reading for all business travellers. However, the report was actually written to help companies understand their duty of care to protect employees each time they board an international flight.

In Australia, this duty of care is covered by occupational health and safety legislation and business travellers can seek damages via workers' compensation laws. Tony Gherardin, the Melbourne-based national medical adviser for The Travel Doctor, says more companies are recognising their duty to provide business travellers with a safe workplace. "And what that means is that companies must ensure their people are fit and suitable and not placing themselves at risk by the travel itself," he says. "And where there are risks, through the presence of local diseases or hazards, they must be aware and have a method of mitigating those risks."

David Cooper, Sydney-based regional medical director for International SOS, says a number of factors influence the level of risk facing a business traveller, including age, destination and trip duration. As you might expect, the chance of experiencing health problems is higher in developing nations, and Australian business travellers are particularly active in the higher-risk destinations, including China, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Staff deployed in overseas markets for longer periods are also more vulnerable to a range of maladies, especially infectious diseases and even mental issues related to anxiety or depression.

And it's older travellers who are more likely to experience health problems, with the highest incidence occurring in those aged between 46 and 55. "They are the senior executives



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who travel," Cooper says. "And during the global financial crisis, they actually travelled even more as they were under great pressure to get out and generate business."

Cooper leads the development of custom corporate health solutions for multinational organisations and warns that even seemingly fit people on short trips to Western nations can face unexpected problems, such as car accidents, cardiovascular complaints or issues related to drugs and alcohol. "Then there are environmental issues, such as snow and ice, which can lead to people breaking ankles."

And although business travellers who find themselves requiring medical assistance in English-speaking countries such as the US or Britain may think they will be fine, they are still likely to be unfamiliar with local health care systems. "Even in developed nations, not all facilities are the same," Cooper says. "For instance, not all hospitals can do cardiology."

The International SOS report recommends companies take a number of actions to meet their duty-of-care obligations. Its suggestions include having an emergency travel plan and regular medicals, exploring global assistance and insurance options, using a preferred-hotel program and constantly alerting travelling staff about security and health risks.

The company, which employees people in more than 70 countries, offers a variety of healthcare support services, including 24-hour medical assistance and emergency evacuations when travellers get in serious trouble. "Most of the work we do is providing advice, because we are trying to prevent admissions and early intervention is important. We want people to call early, so we can refer them early."

Australian-owned The Travel Doctor also works closely with companies to prepare business travellers before departure. "We first provide a measure of suitability – in other words, we check a person doesn't have issues that may compromise them or the job," Gherardin says. "And we look at individual preparation to understand the likely risks and manage those via education, vaccinations, preventive medications and medical kits with prescription items so they can self-manage when travelling."

Gherardin advises travellers and employers to stay up to date on global health issues by following key websites, including the Australian government's Smart Traveller ([smartraveller.gov.au](http://smartraveller.gov.au)), the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention ([cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)) and the World Health Organisation ([who.int/en](http://who.int/en)). ■