South Australia Incorporated

Environmental Health Workforce Attraction and Retention - Research Paper

Final Document

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Endorsed: Susan Bennett (President EHS SA Inc Board) and Sally Modystach
On behalf of the EHA (SA) Inc Board
1. Introduction

1.1 About Environmental Health Australia

Environmental Health Australia (EHA) is a national organisation and is the peak body representing Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) in Australia. EHOs in South Australia (SA) are authorised officers under, including but not limited to, the Food Act 2001, the Public and Environmental Health Act 1987 (to be repealed by the Public Health Act 2011), the Local Government Act 1999 and the Supported Residential Facilities Act 1992.

The mission of EHA (SA) Inc. is to provide a sustainable and effective framework to empower an active and professional membership in South Australia. The organisation is committed to professional development and the enhancement of environmental health standards and services to the community.

1.2 A Review of Environmental Health Workforce Attraction and Retention in SA

In 2004, a comprehensive study, coordinated by the Department of Health (DoH) was undertaken to review the EHO workforce in SA (DoH, 2004). This 2004 review involved a number of key stakeholders including: DoH, the Local Government Association of SA (LGA), EHA (formerly AIEH), and Flinders University. The review highlighted that 43% of EHOs in SA expected to work in the field for less than a further 5 years.

The objective of the ‘Environmental Health Officer Attraction and Retention Research’, was to follow up the 2004 study in respect to the EHO workforce levels and future sustainability. EHA (SA) Inc. was interested in researching how to attract and retain EHOs in SA.

2. Research Approach

In September 2010, Courtney Bartosak, on behalf of EHA (SA) Inc. distributed a survey to all EHOs in SA titled Environmental Health Officer Attraction and Retention. 81 EHOs in SA responded to the survey, out of a total of approximately 150 EHOs. This survey was specifically designed to determine what would attract or retain EHOs in the industry, rather than focusing on the number of EHOs that are looking to leave the profession.

In April 2011, Courtney Bartosak, on Behalf of EHA (SA) Inc. sent out a survey to all EHOs in SA titled EHA membership and Involvement. This survey revealed some relevant findings with respect to EHOs working in rural versus metropolitan settings as well as full time versus part time EHOs.
This paper summarises the relevant findings of these surveys.

3. Survey Findings

In respect to the EHO workforce, there has been approximately a 10% shift in gender, with the percentage of males decreasing from 59% in 2004 to 49% in 2010. There was also an increase in female EHOs, being represented at 41% in 2004 to 51% of the EHO workforce in 2010, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 – Gender of EHOs in SA – Comparison between 2004 and 2010**

There are a large proportion of EHOs under 30 (43%) and a significant number of EHOs over 50 (26.6%). When considering a further breakdown of age in the EHA membership and Involvement survey, it was found that of the 26.6% of EHOs over 50, there were 18.1% aged 51 – 60, and 8.5% of EHOs aged over 60 (refer to Figure 2).
The 2010 survey highlighted that there is significant depth to the level of experience of EHOs in SA. 77.6% of EHOs have had more than 3 years experience in the field, whilst a staggering 38.8% of EHOs have had 10 or more years of experience. In comparison to the 2004 EHO Workforce Review, 43% of EHOs had more than 10 years experience, indicating that there has been a number of retirements or changes in the profession, and valuable experience lost. There is however an increased percentage of EHOs who have 5-10 years experience, from 17% in 2004 to 25% in 2010.
The *EHA membership and Involvement* survey found that 80.9% of EHOs work full time and 19.1% of EHOs work part time. Only 35.7% of part time EHOs envisaged themselves eventually returning to work full time.

**Figure 4 – EHO Working Hours**

Of the respondents of the *EHA membership and Involvement* survey, 62.7% work in city locations, and 37.3% work on the metropolitan fringe or in rural locations. Of those working in the country, 92% are happy to stay in a rural setting, and only 8% are looking to move back to the city.
The survey research revealed that the factors keeping EHOs at their current organisation included (from most to least important):

1. ‘I like the work I do’
2. Pay
3. Work/life balance
4. Employment security
5. Employment conditions
6. Relationships at work
7. Proximity to home

It is therefore important for EHOs to enjoy the work that they do, and feel that they are renumerated appropriately. Work / life balance is also of great importance.
According to EHOs in SA, there will be a fair amount of movement in the field. 16.2% are looking at leaving their organisation soon, and a further 36.5% of EHOs are looking to move within the next year or two. This survey has not determined whether EHOs were looking at leaving the profession all together, or just changing organisations as opportunities present themselves.

With respect to the factors that are keeping EHOs at their current organisation, pay is ranked as the second most important. 50.7% of EHOs are unhappy or dissatisfied with the amount of remuneration that they receive based upon the role that they undertake and their level of experience. This is a key factor in retaining and/or attracting experienced EHOs.

The survey highlighted that the following factors would attract EHOs to another organisation (from most to least important):

1. Pay
2. Career progression paths
3. Good leadership and a structured team
4. Employment conditions
5. Training and development opportunities
6. Proximity to home
7. Promotion/recognition of environmental health initiatives within the industry
Pay is certainly attractive to EHOs and would attract them to another organisation. It was also found that career progression paths and good leadership with structured teams are of importance.

Although proximity to home was not considered a highly important factor in terms of attraction to another organisation, 43.2% of EHOs are not prepared to travel more than 20 minutes to get to work (as shown in Figure 7). This may pose a problem for councils in the northern suburbs and rural areas as Flinders University in southern metropolitan Adelaide is the only University in SA offering the ‘Environmental Health’ course.

Figure 7 – Maximum Time EHOs are Prepared to Travel to Work
It was found that although an organisation could offer a very attractive package to try to attract EHOs to their organisation, if the EHO has formed any negative perceptions about the organisation or team, 78.9% of EHOs would not apply for the position.

4. Discussion

In South Australia, in order to become an EHO and be authorised under public health legislation, you must have tertiary qualifications in Environmental Health. In the 1980’s to early 1990’s there was a TAFE course offered in Environmental Health. From the mid 1990’s the TAFE course ceased, and a 3 year degree was offered at Flinders University of South Australia – a Bachelor of Environmental Health, until 2009. Flinders University now offers a Graduate Diploma in Environmental Health, whereby an applicant must have completed a minimum three year Bachelor degree (in a science related field) to enrol in the course. The University could not sustain the numbers required to continue the Bachelor degree for a variety of reasons. The ongoing future of the Graduate Diploma in Environmental Health at Flinders University is unknown. However the attraction of applicants to the course and its viability, are critical to addressing workforce shortages in environmental health in SA.

In the 1980’s – 1990’s, the EHO profession was predominantly male dominated, and since the introduction of the university course, there has been an increase of female practitioners, with almost even numbers of male to female ratio today (Isbestor & Bennett 2009, p. 14).

There are further labour market considerations with the increase of younger female practitioners, as feminisation may impact the workforce for short periods of time to allow for maternity leave (Isbestor & Bennett 2009, p. 15). Furthermore, casualisation and part time employment of the workforce may contribute to workforce shortages due to some EHOs wanting to remain in the field, but only on a part time basis (such as after maternity leave) (Isbestor & Bennett 2009, p. 15).

The skilled EHO workforce appears to be on the decline. According to Harrison Research (2010, p.10) one third of the professionals surveyed (Building Officers, Planners and EHO’s) intended to leave their profession within 5 years, with the intention of EHO’s stronger than any other profession. 29% of those surveyed indicated retirement as the reason to leave the profession. There will be a negative impact on the environmental health industry due to a loss of skills and knowledge of people retiring and practitioners leaving the profession (Isbestor & Bennett 2009, p. 15).

In addition, many EHO’s are seeking a change in workplace. The 2010 survey found that 52.7% of EHO’s in South Australia were considering leaving their organisation within a year or two, with 16.2% looking to leave soon. This survey did not, however, clarify whether they were leaving their workplace to remain in the profession.
5. Recommendations and EHAs position

There is a need for further investigation into the retention of EHOs in SA. Preliminary results from Bartosak (2010) and Harrison Research (2010) identify a significant number of EHOs either having a change in workplace or leaving the profession in the near future. A comprehensive study to assess all of the elements of the 2004 EHO workforce review is required.

It is recommended that EHA meet with the Department of Health, the LGA, Flinders University and other stakeholders to discuss strategies to attract and retain Environmental Health Officers within the industry.

A further suggestion is to conduct a review of the recommendations from the EHO workforce review (2004) to see how many strategies or recommendations were implemented, and to evaluate their effectiveness (what was found to work, not work, or was never implemented and why?).

The key question remains; are EHOs leaving the profession to chase more money elsewhere? Or have they simply had enough? Bartosak (2010) found that the most attractive factor to another organisation is pay and remuneration. Should organisations consider the appropriateness of the remuneration for EHOs?

6. Conclusion

Since 2004 there has been a shift in gender of EHOs by 10% so that there are now equal numbers of males to females. There has been an increase in the number of females in the workforce (particularly with a large number of EHOs aged between 20-30 years). The workforce in SA is experiencing a trend of many female EHOs taking maternity leave, and opting to either part time or casually.

There is a fair amount of experience within the EHO field with 25% having 5-10 years of experience and 38.8% having more than 10 years experience. Harrison Research (2010) and Bartosak (2010) have found that there will be significant movement out of the EHO industry (one third over 5 years) or changes in workplace. Bartosak (2010) found pay and remuneration is an important factor in retaining EHOs along with opportunities for career progression.

Further investigation by key stakeholders is required to gain a more accurate representation of the EHO workforce in SA in order to assist with planning, attracting and retaining EHOs. Failure to do so may result in further losses of experienced EHOs within the SA.

7. References
1. Bartosak, C. 2010, *Survey of the South Australian Environmental Health Workforce*, Environmental Health Australia

2. Bartosak, C. 2011, *EHA membership and Involvement*, Environmental Health Australia


5. Isbester, C & Bennett, S. 2009, “*Adjust & Accelerate*” a Marketing plan for *Environmental Health Australia*, Adelaide