When it comes to dealing responsibly with drinking problems at work, research shows we should target the boardroom, not the bar room. And dealing with drugs at work can mean giving management methods a fix. Frequently the problem is more work style than lifestyle.

In December 2001, the TUC launched its Drunk or disordered guide to drugs and alcohol in the workplace. It called on employers to develop workplace policies. TUC general secretary John Monks said: “Trade unions should see that effective policies are pursued at work, both to prevent substance abuse and to help those who may have become dependent on alcohol or drugs.”

The introduction of a comprehensive, planned drug and alcohol policy covering the whole of the work force can have significant benefits for employers, employees with a problem at an early stage; and to develop workplace policies. TUC says successful policies must have commitment from the most senior management level. Policies should: recognise that alcohol/drug misuse is a health problem; prevent drug/alcohol misuse through awareness programmes; identify employees with a problem at an early stage; and provide assistance to employees with drug/alcohol related problems.

**Blame work style**

A bad job can drive you to drink or drugs and employers should give serious thought to how their actions can damage the physical and emotional health of their employees (Hazards 58). A December 2000 US study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* concluded that where work problems interfered with family life, affected workers were three times more likely to have a mood disorder, such as depression, 2.5 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder and twice as likely to have a ‘substance dependence disorder.’

The situation was even worse where family problems impinged on work, with substance dependence 11 times as common in workers with these conflicts.

Researcher Michael Frone commented that “in terms of practical implications, the present results suggest employers should not overlook workplace to family and family-to-work conflict as a source of stress in the lives of employed men and women.”

“Of course, simply developing strategies and programmes to reduce either type of work family conflict is not enough. Corporate cultures also must change so that employees feel comfortable taking advantage of the available resources.”

**Failing the test**

Why can the Alco-Cops measure the alcohol in your breath at work?– a company has been selling workplace breathalysers for a couple of years now – but never consider measuring the levels of the dozens of toxic chemicals on site?

TUC notes: “The available data do not produce sufficient evidence to show that alcohol and drug testing programmes improve productivity and safety in the workplace. No adequate tests currently exist which can accurately assess the effect of alcohol and drug use on job performance.”

The guide adds: “A well developed and effective health and safety management policy, and the confidence that brings, is the best way of dealing with drugs in the workplace.

However, if an employer is determined to go ahead with a testing regime this should only take place within the context of a workplace alcohol and drug policy developed in consultation with the trade unions and the workforce.”

Hazards warned in 1996 that workplace drug tests could be costly, inaccurate, discriminatory, a diversion from real workplace health problems and a civil rights abuse (Hazards 55).

**The law**

In addition to general drugs and road traffic legislation, workplace safety laws can apply. The Transport and Works Act 1992: Makes it a criminal offence for certain workers to be unfit through drugs and/or drink while working on railways, tramways and other guided transport systems. The operators of the transport system would be guilty of an offence unless they had shown all due diligence in trying to prevent such an offence.

**General duties: The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974** places a duty on the employer to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations require employers to assess the risks to the health and safety of their employees. The Work in Compressed Air Regulations: Places duties on contractors and/or workers.

**Information**

The TUC guide Drunk or disordered, ISBN 1 860096468, is available priced £1.50 (post free for TUC members) from TUC Publications, tel 020 7408 1294, web: www.tuc.org.uk/publications. forwards may be made by the individual worker who considers he or she may have a problem, by management or by a supervisor, by family members, a colleague or trade union representative. The employer may refer the worker for medical examination or assessment by a qualified professional who will advise the worker if treatment is needed.

Reintegration this should describe the duties and responsibilities of the individual during and after treatment. Review: this needs to be at regular intervals, to help refine and improve the programme.

Confidentiality participation in the programme and information arising from that participation should remain strictly confidential. Assistance policies must make clear that the assistance given to employees with substance misuse related problems are separate from the disciplinary procedure.

**Discipline** the policy should say at what stage in or what circumstances the disciplinary procedures will be invoked, for example, if an individual with a drug or alcohol related problem refuses assistance, denies the problem, or discontinues a course of treatment and returns to work in a factory level of performance and conduct.

Safety critical jobs it should be agreed which tasks are “safety critical,” so being under the influence of drugs or alcohol becomes an immediate disciplinary offence.

**TUC guide: Alcohol Concern and Drugscope, aims to provide a workplace drugs and alcohol policy can be found in the TUC Drunk or disordered guide (see information)”

I’m not swallowing that!

Alcohol Concern, in its 2000 report Britain’s Ruin, claims that “workers that misuse alcohol are 2 to 3 times more likely to be involved in an industrial accident,” with up to 25 per cent of work accidents involving “intoxicated workers.” This figure finds its way into dozens of “expert” guides. In fact, the source cited by Alcohol Concern is a study on “home and leisure” accident risks. Getting intoxicated in a pub or at home is a lot easier to carry off than it is in a workplace.

HSE’s main guidance, Don’t mix it, is explicit: “There are no precise figures on the number of workplace accidents where alcohol is a factor.” One of the few pieces of workplace research cited by Alcohol Concern showed over 90 percent of all workers attending casualty after a workplace accident had no alcohol at all in their systems.