



**TruckSure** By Trevor Toohill

# TRUCKIES – DON'T COME HOME 1ST..... COME HOME SAFE!!!

As I write this article another truck accident has occurred in the Waikato which has resulted in the tragic death of a driver and costly financial loss of vehicle, trailer, and the freight carried.

This accident was a single vehicle incident and happened in the very early hours of a Tuesday morning.

The most dangerous time in any 24 hour period on the road for heavy transport drivers.

I do not want to use this tragedy for the sake of a story but it does highlight one of the most serious factors in single vehicle incidents – **lack of sleep** (mistakenly referred to as fatigue).

**Fatigue** covers a multitude of conditions and the word is usually associated with physical exhaustion. However, physical exhaustion is a bi-product of physical exertion. Something that occurs following high energy events such as running a marathon, performing in the Coast to Coast ironman event or spending the day in the forest on the end of a chainsaw.

I am not brave enough to suggest that the life of a Truck Driver is a breeze and that by the end of a hard week you are not totally knackered, but I want to make the point that there is a huge difference between fatigue and **lack of sleep**.

If it was purely fatigue that was the main cause of these accidents then surely they would be happening towards the end of the shift or at the end of a hard week – but that is not when these preventable accidents are taking place.

The most dangerous time to be driving a truck, in respect to single vehicle incidents, is on shift work within the first 200km from base and between 1am and 4am. Why is this? You have only been out of bed for a few hours, behind the wheel for a couple of hundred km, and it is only Tuesday!!!

Doesn't make any sense – not a sign of fatigue, but you have experienced the tiredness of this shift and no doubt had a couple of close shaves around these times.

You need to understand that this tiredness is caused by lack of sleep – not fatigue, but even more importantly from the upsetting of your natural body clock – your **circadian rhythms**.

I can hear you say circadian what! Sounds like the name of some band playing at a poncy restaurant.

Circadian rhythms by Brandon Peters MD definition is – **Definition:** The natural pattern of physiological and behavioural processes that are timed to a near 24-hour period. These processes include sleep-

wake cycles, body temperature, blood pressure, and the release of hormones. This activity is controlled by the biological clock, which is located in the human brain. It is highly influenced by natural dark-light cycles, but will persist under constant environmental conditions.

Disruptions to the circadian rhythm can cause problems with the sleep-wake cycle.

So what is the significance of lack of sleep, tiredness, fatigue, circadian rhythms, to me you may ask?

Well just about everything if you are interested in staying alive and in business. You can to a limited extent control your ability to force yourself to stay awake on your Monday shift. By Tuesday you are driving on auto and at the most dangerous time in your weekly shift cycle. Wednesday through to the end of your shift week you have conditioned yourself and are driving in a safer cycle.

Come the weekend and a couple of late nights your body clock is all out of sequence again and the danger period repeats.

Understanding all this is one thing but I can just about hear you say that it has no effect on you and that anyway 'the accident always happen to the other guy'. Maybe, but maybe not.

This article is about coming home safe. Knowing a little about the danger of driving early shifts and having a slight understanding of that tiredness you experience in the cab in the darkness of that shift may just be enough to get you to change a few simple habits.

Get quality sleep – 7 to 8 hours.

Exercise – even a simple walk.

Reduce caffeine and alcohol intake.

Use rest areas.

Think about what you eat – take plenty of fresh fruit, nuts and water into the cab with you every trip.

And as Dr Sam Charlton, Engineering Psychologist at the University of Waikato, suggested to me at a recent transport seminar, use a sun lamp at the start of your shift. A 10 minute burst of ultra violet light may be just enough to kick your body clock into gear. Besides, you will get a pretty good tan into the bargain.

The other serious contender for first prize in these no winner stakes is speed, but I have run short on space in this article. Think about these risks but more importantly think about coming home safe. ☺



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*'You sit behind the wheel – we stand behind the truck'*