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SEPTEMBER

2002

## EXTENDED TOURS OF DUTY

by Dawna Lockhart MLT

Depending on whom you ask, twelve-hour shifts can be a benefit or a burden for health professionals. As illustrated here, the case can be made both for and against an extended workday.

***Extended tours of duty are a good idea because...*** I've been working for over twenty-five years. As I get older I no longer want to slog into work every day, week after week, year after year. I want more time for my life away from work. Part time employment is not an option for someone nearing retirement. Pension is based on your earnings in the last few years leading up to retirement. Extended tours would give me bigger blocks of days off while maintaining my income level.

***Extended tours of duty are a bad idea because...*** I've been working for over twenty-five years. As I age I am more easily fatigued. I am not able to rest sufficiently between shifts. I value my sleep as I get older. I find it incredibly difficult to work the equivalent of five standard days in only three. When I finally finish my three or four shifts, it takes at least a day to recover. Then I play catch up with all the errands I did not have time for while working.

***Extended tours of duty are a good idea because...*** I have children still at home. It is hard to find the energy to parent, as I should, after a day's work. Our quality time and special activities are crammed into the two days off I get out of every seven. Those two days off are not necessarily together, which necessitates even more cramming into that quality time. My children complain, "Dad, do you have to work again today?" It would be so nice to have four, five or six days off in a row, to be able to catch up on projects, take a trip, participate in field trips and other school activities.

***Extended tours of duty are a bad idea because...*** I have children still at home. For the days when I am scheduled to work, all I am able to do is work, eat and sleep. There is no time left over in that twenty-four hours for anything extra. For three, sometimes four days I am not able to help with extracurricular activities, pay bills or grocery shop. All that responsibility falls on my spouse, who also works. I miss being able to enjoy meals with my family. Supper is finished with before I arrive home. I am sometimes able to squeeze a few minutes in to say goodnight to the children before having to retire for the night myself.



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## INCONCLUSIVE STUDIES AND CONFLICTING WORKER ANECDOTES

There have been many studies done in the manufacturing sector regarding twelve-hour shifts. Circadian Technologies has published several studies of twelve vs. eight-hour shifts. Their studies claim improvements in psychological health, reduced feelings of tiredness, decreased irritability/sleeping problems, no difference in productivity, statistically equal performance in reaction times and decreased accidents during twelve-hour shifts.

Other studies and conflicting worker anecdotes have led the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) to conclude "It is probably fair to say that heavy physical jobs and/or jobs that demand sustained attention throughout the workday do not lend themselves well to extended workday schedules." The CCOHS also states that where employees may be exposed to physical and chemical hazards caution is needed. When the workday is lengthened, the amount of exposure needs to be reevaluated to ensure that acceptable levels are not exceeded.

Research on airline pilots led to a requirement for them to take a nap after twelve hours on overseas flights. Fire departments are required by labour standards to provide sleeping accommodation to fire fighters on night shifts.

There have been very few comprehensive

studies done on this subject for the health care sector. Lots of anecdotal evidence would have us believe that there is no appreciable difference, either to patient care or to one's own health in working twelve or eight-hour shifts.

Everybody knows that there's a limit to the length of time in which you can work before you start losing your ability to make judgments. But is that eight hours? Twelve hours? Does that change with age? Does it matter how many shifts in a row you work? What about the "second shift" we do at home? Until the research is done for health care professionals these questions remain largely unanswered.

The case has been made for both sides but the jury is still out.



**It's all a question of balance and what works for you!**

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