

WORKPLACE ISSUES Working in dreamland

Sleep disorders can cut productivity, cause accidents

By LISA HAARLANDER
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BILL WIPPERT/Buffalo News Dr. Daniel Rifkin is medical director of the Sleep Disorder Center of Western New York, where technical director Ed Snusz demonstrates how patients wear 16 electrodes and two monitor belts to study their sleep patterns.



Nurse Dawn DePaulo attaches electrodes to Ed Snusz.

About one in five workers suffers from some sort of sleep disorder. And a morning cup of coffee may not be enough to fix the problem. Sleep deprivation can impact productivity and in some cases lead to on-the-job injuries.

"One of the things we're really trying to do is educate the public and employers about sleep disorders," said Daniel Rifkin, medical director at the Sleep Disorder Center of Western New York, which is located at Millard Fillmore Hospital in Buffalo. "When someone is falling asleep on the job, they're perceived as lazy. In reality, there can be a serious medical condition."

Rifkin diagnosed one patient with narcolepsy, a disorder that can cause people to fall asleep without warning. The patient came to him after losing three fingers in a work accident at a company that had written him up 23 times for falling asleep on the job.

Rifkin and other experts are speaking at a free seminar on the impact of sleep deprivation on employees and ways companies can address the problem. "Listen Up: A Health Seminar on Employee Alertness and Productivity" takes place Tuesday from noon to 4:30 p.m. in the Adams Mark Hotel, 120 Church St. The Research Center for Stroke and Heart Disease at the Jacobs Neurological Institute, Buffalo General Hospital of Kaleida Health and the Niagara Health Quality Coalition are sponsoring the event. Sanofi-Synthelabo, a global health care company, provided the funding.

Maggie Wallum wants to learn ways that her employer, Rich Products Corp., can help its employees, some of whom work the second and third shifts.

"I think it makes your work environment more stressful when you're not getting enough sleep," said Wallum, who is in charge of the company's 24-hour wellness center.

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Allan Pack, chief of the division of sleep medicine and director of the Center for Sleep and Respiratory Neurobiology at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center will speak at the seminar about snoring and sleep apnea, and discuss accidents caused by drivers falling asleep. A study he co-authored found the fatality rate for these crashes was similar to that of alcohol-related crashes. Sandra Block, a sleep disorders medicine specialist and assistant professor of neurology at the University at Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences will also speak.

The event is free but participants must register by calling 859-3900 or visiting www.strokeheart.org.

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