

Jump in drug use among workers

By BRAD WATTS

A STAGGERING one in eight Australians are endangering lives by testing positive to drugs at work — an alarming rate which has more than doubled over the past decade.

More than 5 per cent of employees are also abusing illicit drugs in high-risk jobs, according to new statistics obtained by *The Daily Telegraph*.

The number of positive tests is expected soar up to a quarter of employees in some industries, drug experts also warned yesterday, with cannabis abuse accounting for more than 90 per cent of positive results.

This alarming trend has also prompted Australia's largest drug testing organisation Medvet laboratories — which conducts 100,000 alcohol and drug tests a year — to demand the Federal and State governments legislate for compulsory drug testing with urine samples in high-risk industries, which has been scoffed at by unions.

Medvet spokesman Steve Korkoneas said governments must enshrine compulsory urine drug testing into the Occupational Health and Safety Act however unions have objected.

"They do it for sports, so why not do it for workplaces — there is a much bigger problem in the wider community," he said.

A spokeswoman for Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Julia Gillard side-

stepped the issue, saying it was a state issue.

Serious concern has also been raised that only 8 per cent of Australian workplaces — including the transport, mining and construction sectors — are regularly drug tested compared to about 80 per cent in the US.

"It's a huge concern in the workplace but a lot of employers are now having a urine drug and alcohol testing program," Mr Korkoneas said.

"At any given time, the positive drug rate using urine testing is 13 to 15 per cent. It could be extremely higher if more tests were conducted."

The rate has more than double over the past 10 years and could soar to almost 25 per cent in the next few years, he added.

ACTU assistant secretary Geoff Fary slammed calls for compulsory tests as an invasion of privacy.

"There should not be open slather testing of employees or whenever they feel like it," Mr Fary said.

A spokesman for Industrial Relations Minister John Della Bosca said for people employed in safety-critical roles such as bus, ferry and train drivers, it was appropriate for testing to occur.

"In other industries, there is nothing to stop the establishment of a voluntary workplace drug testing policy," he said.