Mental health among NHS staff

What’s the problem, and is enough being done?

Mental health in the workplace is a subject that hasn’t always been given the focus it deserves. But an incredible 70 million work days are lost every year in the UK because of mental health issues. It’s a big issue that’s getting little attention.

In the NHS, mental health issues among staff are inevitably being exacerbated by well-publicised staff shortages. With more demand for healthcare services, and increased pressure to make those services more cost-efficient, workers’ wellbeing is perhaps being sacrificed.

Are NHS staff feeling the pressure?

A BBC investigation in 2015 found that the number of NHS staff calling in sick for mental health reasons had more than doubled in 5 years. The same report noted that, within the same period, 3000 nursing posts had been lost in the UK, with funding cut by around 8%. It seemed fairly certain that there was a direct correlation between mental health among staff and increased workload.

This is just one study among many that draws similar conclusions. A Mind survey found that nearly 90% of NHS primary care workers were stressed, and more than 20% had developed serious mental health problems as a result. Another by Community Care found that 56% of mental health social workers were suffering high levels of stress that was affecting their work.

The Care Quality Commission has also concluded that trusts with poor records for staff mental health also offer poorer quality care. As anyone who’s suffered mental health problems knows only too well, it’s all-encompassing – and the damage can stretch far and wide.

Is the NHS doing enough to combat the issue?

Simon Stevens announced a £5 million plan to tackle health among NHS staff back in 2015. And within that plan, reducing stress was given a renewed focus.

But a large number of NHS trusts currently aren’t doing enough. Only 57% of NHS trusts have a plan in place to support the mental wellbeing of their staff. And Simon Stevens’ plan hasn’t exactly taken clear shape since 2015. Localised progress has been made, but it isn’t an area obtaining budget or focus currently.

Meanwhile, it’s been concluded that an NHS employee is more likely to suffer from mental health issues relating to their work than the average UK employee elsewhere.

The consensus is fairly damning: the NHS isn’t prioritising the mental health of its staff.
What needs to change?

NHS trusts need to implement mental health wellbeing policies – that’s a must.

With policies in place, managers can make decisions about intervening when signs of mental health problems emerge. And they can get the right help, quickly.

But beyond policy, it’s widely agreed that pragmatic changes are needed too – active steps that aim to alleviate stress immediately.

For employers in general, the following measures are seen as key to creating mentally healthy workplaces:

- **Talking about mental health.** It sounds obvious, but first and foremost trusts and NHS workplaces need to communicate with staff that they are taking mental health seriously. Whatever they’re doing to help, they need to shout about it. Above all, it needs to be clear that these problems are not being swept under the carpet.

- **Promoting wellbeing at work.** This means actively implementing strategies at work that aim to make a difference, every day. These include:
  - Ensuring staff have a healthy work-life balance, and regularly checking that they feel they do
  - Being clear about responsibilities and expectations, and not therefore creating unexpected pressures
  - Encouraging regular breaks and exercise at work
  - Organising regular social events
  - Recognising and rewarding achievements

- **Supporting staff.** When problems arise, employees need unconditional support. You’ll need honest and open communication, and a great deal of patience. Their needs must be accommodated and their working conditions may need to change. Above all, consistent contact must be maintained.

However, the number one cause of mental health issues among NHS staff is workload. Having a wellbeing policy in place will help – as will any positive steps to ease stress. But unless the issue of staff shortages is solved, employees will continue to be overworked. That is the uncomfortable truth that undermines this problem.