

Essential care

Nicola Davies analyses the Boorman review into the health and wellbeing of NHS staff

The NHS grew out of the ideal that good health care should be available for all. Although there have been great efforts to improve the patient experience, few have enquired into the health of NHS staff.

The NHS constitution pledges commitment to the health and wellbeing of all staff, but there is a strong case for change and improvement. The independent Boorman review into the health of NHS staff, published last year, emphasised that to provide high quality care, healthy staff are not simply 'nice-to-have', but essential.

The review gathered evidence about staff health and recommended improvements. More than 80 per cent of respondents believed the wellbeing of staff affects patient care. The review also found:

- Staff sickness absence runs at 10.7 days per person annually.
- 10.3 million days are lost to sickness annually, costing the NHS £1.7 billion.
- Many staff feel obliged to work when they are sick.
- Significant levels of stress.

Armed with these findings, the review recommends:

- Regular assessment of staff health needs.
- Staff health services should be integral to the goals of the organisation.
- Managers should recognise that employee support is their responsibility.
- Early support for staff with musculoskeletal and mental health conditions.

The implementation of these recommendations depends on several factors, including the presence of an occupational health nursing service. Nurses constitute almost half the occupational health workforce and can have a critical impact on the way OH services are provided.

For example, the OH nurses (OHNs) in one NHS trust underwent training in cognitive behavioural therapy so they could manage staff with stress and mental health problems.

This example of OHN provision contrasts with previous approaches. Employees presenting with mental health problems would previously have been referred to their GP or counselling service. OHNs are important for staff health, and it is vital to invest in their continuing development.

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