

Stress expert warns: NHS needs to change if sickness rates are to fall

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Published on 19 Oct 2009



Psychologist, Dr Derek Mowbray, says wellbeing is vital.

NHS Boards in Scotland will fail to address sickness absence unless they tackle the frustrations and poor management that lead to unhappy staff, according to a psychologist who is an expert on stress.

Professor Derek Mowbray also claimed that some rural parts of Scotland attract NHS workers who settle because of the lifestyle – but then feel they cannot move on if they become disenchanted with their work.

Mowbray, who has a consultancy service and is a visiting professor at the University of Northumbria, is responsible for the publication of a new Performance and Wellbeing Agenda about to be launched in England.

An expert on stress in the NHS, he is also the author of a set of management guidelines for health boards and trusts which have been backed by organisations including the Institute of Healthcare Management and the British Medical Association.

He argues that NHS chiefs needed to acknowledge that staff performance is directly related to how positive and “well” they feel about their work.

Earlier this month, the Scottish Government said a significant reduction in NHS Scotland’s sickness absence had enabled staff to deliver a million more hours of patient care, with sick leave down from 5.55% of all working hours to 4.95%.

While hailing a “sustained downward trend”, Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon said more progress must be made. “Sickness absence is still higher than we would want and I expect all boards to continue their efforts to promote good health and enable staff to return to work as quickly as possible,” she said.

For Professor Mowbray, sickness absence in Scotland needs to be seen in the context of performance and wellbeing. He said there was significant evidence that improving staff wellbeing led to improvements in performance, but said this could not be achieved by offering incentives to staff to be healthy through physical fitness programmes, nutrition initiatives, massage sessions or other benefits. Instead it required a change of ethos to address the culture of the NHS.

“Those measures tackle the symptoms, not the real issues,” he said. “Survey results indicate a large amount of disenchantment with management, and the sickness rates remain higher than in the private sector and than in many parts of the public sector.

“There has to be an acceptance that being attentive to other people and listening to people, rather than having a centralised, controlled, target-driven culture, is the start point. There is massive evidence for the benefits of a wellbeing approach, and it has been adopted by many leading companies around the world.”

Mowbray said he believed the NHS in England had become a bullying culture, but that the Scottish NHS had taken a different course. However, he added: “Some parts of Scotland, Argyll and Bute and the Highlands, for example, have very high sickness rates but very low staff turnover rates. The reason for that is that people have left other jobs to go there because of the lifestyle. But if they become disaffected for whatever reason, they can’t leave because there isn’t anywhere else to go in the area.”

His claims come just days after the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) released a survey which showed that many nurses feel they are too busy to provide the highest standards of care. In the survey of Scottish nurses, 52% said they were forced by overwork to deliver standards of care that they were not happy with.

Norman Provan, the RCN’s associate director for employment relations, said this was cause for concern, particularly against a background of present and future cuts. But he added that the partnership model in Scotland was broadly effective, with standards for staff governance enshrined in law, which meant some of the issues raised by Mowbray were being handled better north of the border.

Further findings from the RCN’s study show that more nurses feel enthusiastic about their jobs and would describe nursing as a rewarding career than at any time in the past 12 years, he said.

Nevertheless, bullying and harassment appear to be emerging as a problem. The NHS’s own staff survey earlier this year showed a rise in numbers complaining of bullying and the RCN study found that in response to the statement “Bullying and harassment are a problem where I work”, only 50% of Scottish nurses disagreed, whereas 58% disagreed UK-wide. A higher proportion also felt they would be worried about whether they would be treated unfairly if they reported a colleague for harassment.

Provan added: “Because we have a more mature partnership approach in the Scottish NHS, staff are being involved in rewriting the bullying and harassment policy as set out under the partnership network.”

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