WORK STRESS

Health service staff stress rising amid plans for mental wellbeing help

By Adrian O'Dowd

Rising levels of bullying and harassment of NHS staff have been revealed in the latest NHS Staff Survey but plans are underway to introduce more mental health and wellbeing support for all healthcare professionals.

The 2018 NHS Staff Survey¹ published on 26 February 2019 was based on responses from 497,117 staff in England and found that increasing numbers of staff reported being bullied and harassed by their managers (12.8% in 2017 rising to 13.2% by 2018) and by their colleagues (up from 18% in 2017 to 19.1% in 2018).

Patients, their relatives and other members of the public were also the cause of an increase in bullying directed at NHS staff – 28.3% of staff reported having experienced this, up from 28.1% in 2017.

However, less NHS staff reported experiencing physical violence from patients, relatives or members of the public. The proportion fell from 15.4% to 14.5% between 2018 and 2017.

Despite these findings, almost three quarters of staff (74%) said they felt enthusiastic about their job – a 6% rise on 2014 – and 81% were satisfied with the quality of care they gave to patients.

Stress also featured largely in the recently published *NHS Staff and Learners' Mental Wellbeing Commission*² report from Health Education England (HEE) which was commissioned by the government.

The report published on 20 February 2019 says a third of the NHS workforce have felt unwell due to work-related stress and half of staff members have attended work despite feeling unwell because they felt pressure from their manager, colleagues or themselves.

Substance misuse problems among dentists and pharmacists were also mentioned in the report alongside various sources of evidence

that doctors have admitted using ecstasy, cocaine and other hallucinogenic drugs, or drinking excessive amounts of alcohol linked to their anxiety and depression.

Following publication of the report, the Department of Health & Social Care

announced it would act on various recommendations made by HEE to tackle problems and offer more support in the form of:

- Post-incident support for NHS frontline staff, such as peer group support or a more formal psychological assessment
- A dedicated mental health support service giving confidential advice and support 24 hours a day
- Fast-tracked mental health referrals for NHS employees if requested as a priority from either a GP or an occupational health clinician
- An 'NHS workforce wellbeing guardian' in every NHS organisation and primary care settings, responsible for championing mental health and wellbeing support for staff.

The BDA welcomed HEE's recommendations for action on stress across health professions, and renewed its call for parity in provision between NHS dentists and GPs on occupational health.

The union said the HEE report built on studies conducted by the BDA and other health associations on the cost of burnout and mental health to staff and the wider health service.

BDA research,³ published recently in the *BDJ*, found that almost half of dentists said stress in their job exceeded their ability to cope, and the most stressful aspects of their work were related to regulation and fear of litigation, and pressures.

The researchers found high levels of stress and burnout amongst a survey of more than 2,000 UK dentists, amongst whom almost a fifth (17.6%) admitted they had seriously thought about committing suicide.

The BDA has called for funded access to the Practitioner Health Programme for NHS dentists across England on the same basis offered at present to GPs. This service provides a range of support and therapies for practitioners experiencing difficulties,

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and is currently only directly accessible for GPs in London.

BDA Chair Mick Armstrong said: 'It is refreshing to see officials waking up to the weight of evidence on stress and burnout in this profession. The logic of this report is sound: no NHS dentist or dental student should suffer for the work they do for the NHS. Now we will need to see these principles joined with action.'

'There are dentists out there in desperate need of support, and they deserve access to services currently offered to our medical colleagues. We know the drivers fuelling this epidemic of burnout – from regulation to the NHS treadmill – and we will need to see an approach founded on prevention, and not just cure' ■

References

1. NHS Survey Coordination Centre. NHS Staff Survey 2018. 2019. Available at <http://www.nhsstaffsurveys.com/Page/1056/Home/NHS-Staff-Survey-2018/> (accessed February 2019).
2. Health Education England. NHS Staff and Learners' Mental Wellbeing Report. 2019. Available at <https://www.hee.nhs.uk/our-work/mental-wellbeing-report> (accessed February 2019).
3. Collin V, Toon M, O'Selmo E, Reynolds L, Whitehead P. A survey of stress, burnout and well-being in UK dentists. *Br Dent J* 2019; **226**: 40–49.