

The Mystery of Sick Building Syndrome . . . Solved?

Over the past few years the infamous 'Sick Building Syndrome', a term used to describe symptoms such as coughing and tiredness at work, has been linked to a number of contributing factors but with no real supporting evidence. The implied causes of sick building syndrome – as the name suggests – range from poor building design or poor ventilation to unacceptable levels of carbon dioxide and many other *physical* factors.

However recent research indicates that the symptoms of sick building syndrome may be more attributable to high levels of **stress** in the work place. The research, which involved 4,000 civil servants from 44 buildings in London, suggest that although physical factors may play some part in the rise of sick building syndrome, it is stress which is the most important affecting factor.

It has been said that Sick Building Syndrome is responsible for the loss of millions of pounds for businesses due to poor productivity and absenteeism and, in light of the recent research, the importance of reducing stress in the workplace is evermore evident.

Andrew Griffiths, Principal Policy Officer for the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health said of the study "Stress is a key health and safety issue which managers must address. The concept of sick building syndrome can act as a distraction; employers must address all factors which influence health and safety as part of their legal responsibilities under the Health and Safety Act."

Stress and your business

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have indicated stress is likely to become the most dangerous risk to business in the early part of the 21st century. Not only is stress presented as sick building syndrome as the study above suggests but the HSE states that stress also presents the following issues which can prove detrimental to your organization:

1 in 5 workers report feeling extremely stressed at work.

Half a million people in the UK suffer work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill.

A total of 12.8 million days a year are lost through injury or ill health as a result of stress.

As shown, it is in the best interest of organisations to identify and root out stress from their working environments. As well as reducing sickness absence costs to an organisation, tackling stress can have a positive effect on:

- Employee commitment to work;
- Staff performance and productivity;
- Staff turnover or intention to leave;
- Staff recruitment and retention;
- Customer satisfaction; and
- Organisational image and reputation.

Other more recent research also suggests that stress may be a major cause for infertility in women—visit www.focuseap.co.uk for more information

Stress Risk Management

Many companies need to respond to their legal obligations and duty of care without unnecessarily highlighting stress as a major issue.

Therefore measuring stress without increasing it provides the basis for more effective people management and this can be achieved by introducing the concept within an employee wellbeing survey.

A staff attitude survey and stress audit based on the HSE guidelines which examines the sources and effects of stress at home and at work, positive and negative coping ability and work-life balance in

general is a practical way forward for many organisations. The choice of an "internet questionnaire survey" or a "paper questionnaire survey" may also be an attractive feature. The audit examines the causes and effects of stress at home and at work along with coping strategies.

The benefit of implementing a stress audit is that a benchmarked data analysis management report is produced with recommendations that can be implemented so that improvements are recognised by both employees and management.

Working with . . . NHS Primary Care Trusts

Setting up an EAP has been a success with staff at three Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and has also helped to achieve IWL distinction.

Focus EAP has been running a highly effective Employee Assistance Programme for Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre PCTs that has had a significant effect on reducing stress in the workplace. It has also been singled out as one of the elements that recently gained Practice Plus status for Wyre PCT in the NHS Improving Working Lives (IWL) standard. This is the highest of the three IWL stages, following on from the Pledge and Practice levels, and the EAP was recognised as an area of good practice in the accreditation.

Originally launched in 2002 as a pilot scheme lasting a year, the EAP is now well established with the West Lancashire PCTs and the contract with Focus has recently been extended for a further three years. A parallel project was carried out at the paediatric department, involving an independent review and departmental assessment by Focus facilitators, including gathering feedback from staff. This has also led to a marked improvement in the working environment by creating a more open communications culture within the department.

PCT direct employees number 620 at Blackpool, 500 at Fylde and 609 at Wyre. They include district nurses, health visitors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and administrators. The EAP is open to all these diversely skilled personnel and is extended to their household members. Additionally, outside contractors such as GPs or dentists and their staffs can be assisted on an ad hoc basis if specifically requested by one of the PCTs.

The service is based on a freephone confidential telephone helpline service and is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.



Counselling and information covers work related stress problems and a huge range of other issues besides, including marital and emotional difficulties, legal and financial questions and consumer complaints.

Helen Clay, Communications Manager for the Wyre Primary Care Trust, said that NHS staff opinion surveys had reported a reduction in staff stress levels and a general satisfaction with the EAP facility. "Employees find that the independent advice offered through the EAP to them and their families has been very helpful in reducing personal pressures. This has also reflected positively on their performance at work. As well as providing a high quality

counselling service, Focus has been very supportive in communicating the benefits of the EAP to both PCT management and employees. We are hoping that more of those eligible to participate will take advantage of the opportunity to use the service."

Most recent figures covering the three months from 1 December 2005 to 28 February 2006 showed that approx 6.3% of employees across the three PCTs used the telephone helpline, compared with approx 9.2% in the first year of the EAP operation. The greatest number of enquiries centred on legal, family/marital and general work issues. However, stress at work was not shown to be a major factor.

Nowadays when we face emotional, interpersonal or physiological problems the traditional health care delivery system may not much help. The main stumbling blocks to getting the help we need can be difficulty finding a qualified professional, lack of accessibility and cost. Employees and employers face the same problem and poor emotional well being can create adverse effects on the working life of the employee. This in turn has implications on the corporate success of the organisation they work for. An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) will help satisfy the needs of your employees while helping meet your corporate objectives.

Why you could use an EAP

- The personal problems of your employees have a dramatic impact on their job performance and productivity. Personal difficulties, such as work-related stress, marital or family problems, or

Benefit of an EAP



alcohol and drug addiction, can affect almost anyone and such problems can impair an employee's performance at work. This in turn leads to lower productivity, strained relations with co-workers and frequent absences or accidents.

- An EAP will help your employee's tackle the difficulties that may be causing them trouble in the workplace. They will be able to get professional psychological counselling to help them resolve their problems. The short-term therapy programme focuses on clarifying the problem, identifying and implementing solutions and monitoring progress. The result is a healthier, more productive employee with improved relations at home and at work.
- Studies have demonstrated a 3:1 return on investment for organisations during the first year of EAP service provision and a 4:1 return on investment thereafter. In addition to bottom-line benefits, there are many other compelling reasons to add an EAP benefit.

To find out more about how an EAP could benefit you, please visit: www.focuseap.co.uk

Carefree! Debt free?

There's something called "work-life balance" which is probably all about choice and maybe getting a better mix of workdays to fun days.

For all but the fortunate few and excessively wealthy, the length of the working week must enable us to earn enough to provide food, shelter and the occasional luxury. And if we can't wait for the next pay check, interest rates are low and credit almost instant – a fistful of store cards can be yours in an afternoon. – providing you can first find somewhere to park the car.

The ready availability of credit means for many, the dream of being mortgage-free has now been eclipsed by a new and more pressing ambition.

A period of carefree spending quite often comes to a sudden and shuddering halt with the realisations that the monthly payments have ramped up to the point where something has to give. It's then that freedom from debt moves to the top of the wish list.

At this point, many mourn the loss of their freedom to spend, whilst others try desperately to solve the problem with strategy of missed or partial monthly payments that just attracts more



attention from the lenders, increasing the pressure, discomfort and stress.

What started off as a pleasurable and positive experience suddenly turns, all too quickly, into something that impacts on relationships, family, friends and work.

If you can't beg, steal or borrow any more money and there's really no one you can confide in for help, just how can you get out of debt?

Although people may flaunt their size of their mortgage, there's less cachet attached to out-of-control debt so there's an inbuilt reluctance to be open and honest about your predicament – even to yourself,

So, where do you turn to for impartial, confidential help and advice?

Focus EAP have reviewed the emerging supplier base for debt help and support organisation that has gained a detailed understanding of both the debt predicament and the difficulty many people have admitting that a problem exists.

We have set up what is proving to be a successful and productive partnership with an innovative, integrated and effective organisation in this market.

If you are concerned about debt management solution please contact us directly and we will arrange a joint meeting to assist you on this complex area.

Dignity at Work – more than bullying

It seems that the general perception of "dignity at work" largely focuses on bullying and harassment. However recent research by Lancaster University set out to explore the 'multidimensional' aspects of dignity in relation to work, taking into account the ideas of "dignity in work" and "dignity at work". Dignity in work is described by Sharon Bolton, Director of the MA programme in human resource at Lancaster University, as "work that is interesting and meaningful and that includes a degree of autonomy and recognised status – 'Dignified Work'". Dignity at work is described as "how people are perceived and valued in the workplace – 'Dignified Workers'".

Numerous websites and publications seem to focus mainly on the latter of the two major dimensions, 'Dignified Workers', offering advice and policies on harassment and bullying, but somewhat ignoring the 'Dignified Work' aspect. Admittedly some policies on bullying and harassment do address some components of dignified work however there are still many other aspects left unaccounted for. The research at Lancaster University identified the following as the *Dimensions of Dignity*:

Dimensions of Dignity

Dignity IN work

- Autonomy
- Job Satisfaction
- Meaningful work
- Respect
- Learning & Development

Dignity AT work

- Wellbeing
- Just reward
- Voice
- Security
- Equal Opportunity

Being able to recognise such dimensions of dignity allows an organisation to better understand their employees' feelings of dignity and the contributing factors involved. The study also allows organisations to look beyond bullying and harassment policies as an end to dealing with dignity issues, though highly effective in some cases, they do not deal with the issue of dignity in its entirety. Acknowledging the variety of 'dimensions' listed may also promote improvement of the organisation as a whole, not only being exclusive to 'dignity' but impacting on other aspects of the business due to the depth and breadth of each dimension.

For more information on dignity at work and the research carried out at Lancaster University, please visit the Lancaster University website.

Abuse to shopworkers on the up

A recent report by retail union Usdaw revealed:

- Up to half a million shopworkers are verbally abused every day
- Verbal abuse increased by up to 35% in the last year
- 95% of shopworkers questioned for the report had experienced verbal abuse

In 2004 the Retail Strategy Group (RSG) reported that the increase in retail crime was directly linked to the increases in drug and alcohol. They also stated that 'Dependency and these crimes place emotional burden on employers and employees'

Angela Clarke, Focus Clinical Manager, says 'Sadly, abuse of employees is not only restricted to verbal abuse. Over the last 18 months, we have seen a significant increase in the number of interventions which we provide in response to incidents of violent abuse in the retail sector. We currently deal with approximately 50 incidents per day compared to 38 per day a year ago.

So what can employers do to protect and support employees?

It is important for employees to feel valued and for the organisation to demonstrate that abuse in any form will not be tolerated. The implementation of appropriate post-trauma support mechanisms, based on robust policies and procedures, is essential if a company is to minimise the impact of such incidents on both the employees and the employer. A 'rapid response team' comprising managers trained in diffusing incidents at the early stages, is also beneficial and to be encouraged.

Domestic violence exposed – Focus EAP can help

Almost two in three men admit they would use violence in 'conflict situations' with their partners.

- 1 In 5 young men think forcing their wives to have sex with them is acceptable
- 1 in 5 boys think it's ok to hit a woman; 1 in 10 girls agree
- 1 in 4 young men said it could be ok to hit a woman if she had slept with someone else.
- Britain has 200 times more sanctuary spaces for abandoned animals than for women experiencing domestic violence.
- *On average 2 women are killed each week by their partners or ex-partners.*

These shocking facts portray the reality of domestic violence in Britain and the severe effects on women. However men can also be victims of domestic violence. Whilst this is less likely and the violence may be less severe it

does not mean that some men are not seriously affected. Children often become involved witnessing violence and abuse. Statistics suggest that in half of families where the mother is abused at least one child is abused also.

Domestic violence has a huge impact on individuals and their families and in turn affects our workforce.

Employees may find it difficult to work effectively and absenteeism may be a result.

Focus EAP offers a confidential service where a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence can call anytime to talk through their situation. A trained counsellor will be able to discuss what options are open to the employee which may include telephone or face-to-face counselling or referral to another agency.

For example the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run by Women's Aid and Refuge)



0808 2000 247 or Respect (for perpetrators) 0845 122 8609.

Employees can be assured of a professional and confidential service.

Legislation Update

Age Discrimination - The Countdown Begins

New laws which deal directly with age discrimination come into force in October 2006 but we are advising clients and businesses to consider this matter well in advance of the implementation date.

This is because evidence of an ageism workplace culture prior to October 2006 will be taken into account by an employment tribunal when dealing with claims which obviously can only be brought after the date upon which the law comes into effect.

10 key points are as follows:

- 1 The all important date is 1 October 2006
- 2 The regulations will cover employment and vocational training which includes recruitment, promotion, development, termination, pay and benefits.
- 3 The law will cover people of all ages.
- 4 All employers will be subject to the new rules.
- 5 Upper age limits for unfair dismissal and redundancy will be removed.
- 6 A national default retirement age of 65 will be introduced making compulsory retirement below 65 unlawful.
- 7 All employees will have the "right to request" to work beyond the default retirement age of 65 or any other (higher) age set by the company.
- 8 All employers will have an ongoing duty to consider all requests from employees to work beyond 65.
- 9 Occupational pensions are covered by the regulations as well as employer contributions to personal pensions.
- 10 Benefits based upon length of service will also be affected.

We would advise all employers to review and consider their current employment policies and practices especially the drafting and language used within advertisements for new positions.

Welcome to new clients



City of Westminster



Making business sense of climate change

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