Impact of organisational change on stress

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The NHS has seen unprecedented levels of change over the past ten years.

The potential health impact on the workforce of major organisational level change such as restructuring is well recognised, (Kings Fund 2018). Whilst change can be positive, staff may be particularly vulnerable to stress where:

- there is a risk of redundancy

- there is a risk of down banding or de-banding

- The services are being outsourced or transferred to another employer

- continuous change of service to offer greater efficiencies.

Higher levels of presentism – going to work despite being unwell – have been observed in workers going through restructuring as there is a perception and sometimes a reality that employees with poor attendance records are more at risk of being made redundant (CIPD 2020, RCN /SOM2020).

Organisational change has also been linked with an increased risk of bullying. Bullying from a manager or a colleague has been found to increase symptoms of stress (HSE 2013b).

There is also evidence that people not made redundant, so called 'survivors', suffer from health problems, report less job satisfaction and have higher absence (Burke 2003). Employees that remain may experience feelings of guilt towards their dismissed colleagues, increased job insecurity and associated anxiety. There is also evidence that pre-existing health problems, such as musculoskeletal disorders can worsen. Working in an unfamiliar environment with increased demands may also cause stress.

All these are subjective to the individual and their tolerance to factors. Some change can be positive, but managers should be aware that stress will occur in individuals where they no longer feel in control and unsupported. The HSE's standards on stress outlines the states to be achieved in order to reduce the impact of organisational change.

To manage the risks of stress from organisational change the employer should be able to demonstrate that:

- employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change

- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

To achieve this, the organisation should:

- provide employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes

- ensure adequate employee consultation on changes and provide opportunities for employees to influence proposals

- ensure that employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs and if necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs

- ensure that employees are aware of timetables for changes

- ensure that employees have access to relevant support during changes.

Managers need to ensure that there is regular and quantifiable measurement of departmental susceptibility to workplace stress.