Preventing absence

Health and safety

Health and safety is all about minimising illness or injury in the workplace. It covers many related aspects such as policies, accident reporting, potential hazards and risk assessments, manual handling, violence towards staff from patients, infection control, needle stick injuries and many more. It is the responsibility of all staff to safeguard the health and safety of the workplace and the team.

As a manager, you have a duty of care to your team to ensure that policies and procedures are followed. You should make yourself aware of your local health and safety policy, as different business areas will have different guidance in place to safeguard health and safety - for example, there will be separate advice for staff working in freight and logistics to those working in an office-based environment. You should be aware of where you need to go to gain further support, such as your occupational health (OH) or Human Resources (HR) departments.

As part of the role of manager, you will need to carry out workplace risk assessments for your work areas and setup preventative measures for any hazards identified. Your OH or HR department can help with any training needed for yourself and your staff to make sure your work area is as safe as possible.
Make links with the team in your organisation responsible for health and safety and find out what you need to do as a manager to keep your team, colleagues and patients safe. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) also has a number of tools on their website (such as the line manager competency indicator tool) to help you assess your own skill levels as a manager in dealing with health and safety issues. These are very useful in identifying where you may need further training, support and information.

The NHS Staff Council's Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group (HSWPG) published a document called 'Workplace health and safety standards'. The standards aim to help organisations comply with health and safety law by pulling together legal requirements and good practice. They provide practical pointers and signposts for meeting appropriate standards in key areas of workplace health and safety. The HSWPG has also published other useful guidance, research and advice on topics such as lone workers, sickness absence and the 'Back in work, back pack', which outlines measures to reduce the incidence of work related back

and musculoskeletal disorders. All of these documents can be found on the health and wellbeing section of NHS Employers website.

Health and safety in the NHS in England is regulated by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). They have a liaison agreement that allows them to co-ordinate actives and share information relating to health and safety within the NHS. They have a wealth of information on their website, including safety alerts for employers. The HSE also works with other trade regulators such as the General Medical Council (GMC) and have agreements with them on health and safety issues for their members.

Sickness absence coding

Sickness absence codes are a useful tool you can use to spot sickness trends in your team. Making sure these are used and recorded properly can help identify problem areas to target with interventions, such as infection prevention and teams under a lot of stress or other mental health issues. If correct codes are used, you can use them to create metrics and compare them to national sickness absence rates to see how your organisation is doing.

Once you have a benchmark for your organisation, you can make contacts with organisations that have lower absence rates and look to improve your own. This could all result in lower sickness absence rates and staff who feel more supported and able to deliver better patient care.

As a line manager you are responsible for recording accurately any sickness absence for the staff you manage, which could help you spot trends in absenteeism and address any potential issues within your team. This means that you must use the agreed process within your organisation, and know what you need to do to follow this. You must also ensure that any sickness absence report is accurate in terms of length of time off, and use the right ESR code for the absence. Failure to do this could impact on your employee's sick pay entitlements, and mean they do not receive the help or support they might need.

The ESR sickness codes are nationally agreed and should be used to identify the absence reasons for employee sickness. This can usually be done during and after the return to work meetings where you can get a

good idea of the absence reason. In all cases you should try to use both ESR codes to drill down to the most appropriate reason. If you are not clear on the code to use or need guidance, you can ask your OH and HR departments to help you.

Sometimes employees may not wish to disclose the nature of their absence, making it hard to give them support. In this case, you should ask them if there is another person they feel more comfortable discussing this with i.e. HR, OH, a manager of the same sex etc. If they still do not want to discuss the issue, perhaps show them the codes and ask them to point out the reason without explaining. It's important you get the code right and can arrange for further help, and that trigger points are activated appropriately for any HR intervention needed.

Appraisal

The appraisal process is one way for managers to assess an employee's health and wellbeing. There are many factors that impact on our health and wellbeing, including lifestyle choices and work-life balance. Many such choices take place outside of the working environment, many will impact employees at work, e.g. having too little sleep, being overweight, dealing with financial pressures. However, beginning a dialogue with your team members can help to identify what improvements can be made to create a healthier workplace.

As a manager you cannot directly influence all the factors which will impact on the health of your staff, however you can create a positive environment in which your employees feel able to discuss some of these issues. This is an important element of supporting health and wellbeing and helping employees to feel valued.
Your organisation may wish to include some specific questions in appraisal documentation to broaden the appraisal discussion to include staff health and wellbeing. Here are some ideas which you may wish to consider as part of your employee appraisals:

Each of the questions above is designed to begin a dialogue through which you can raise issues of concern about health and wellbeing and work towards answers that can benefit the whole team.

You may also then want to find out what is happening within your organisation or where you can direct staff to find out about other activities and groups which might support and encourage their wellbeing approach.

- Are there any barriers to the health and wellbeing of your staff?

- How do you believe your staff are feeling?

- How do you think this is affecting the work of your team?

- How can you work together to support the health and wellbeing of the team more effectively?

- Are you aware of team members that are showing signs of stress? What do you think you can do to assist them?

- Are you aware of the organisation's health and wellbeing strategy and your role in delivering it?

- Have you assessed the health and wellbeing needs of your team? Do you know who to go to for assistance in doing this?

- Do you have a plan for improving the health and wellbeing of your team and have you shared it with them and discussed how it is to be achieved?

Resilience

Resilience is all about maintaining your own high performance and a positive sense of wellbeing, even when facing difficult times, high pressured workloads or misfortune. As a manager you can help your team become more resilient and bounce back from problems by helping them avoid the issues associated with rust-out (not enough work, boredom, no challenge) and burn-out (too much work, pressure, stress). Try to help your team as a whole to maintain a balance in between rust-out and burn-out to keep them engaged, in control of their workloads and foster their own sense of purpose.

You can use the strengths of your team by:

- focusing on areas that are working well, develop clear team values and goals

- developing the strengths of your staff alongside any weak points

- fostering positivity, make your staff feel good when they are doing what they are good at to give them a sense of purpose

- ensuring your team know where they can get support, and help them to maintain a good work-life balance by promoting health and wellbeing activities/information.

- being flexible, adaptable and open to ideas and change

- identifying and spotlight staff in your team who are strong in one of the following - problem solving / decision making / interpersonal skills / motivation - variety will make your team stronger.

Role of the line manager

As a line manager you can have a significant influence on the health and wellbeing of your staff. Best practice and research shows that competent line managers can contribute positively to the experience of employees. Many organisations are beginning to provide further training for managers on how best to manage their staff, alongside the softer skills required to support this. Improving these skills will assist you in managing sickness absence, developing the health and wellbeing of your employees and being seen to 'walk the talk'. Here are some useful pointers that you could be doing or working towards:

- deal with staff who are ill in a fair, sensitive, consistent and confidential manner

- keep accurate records of your team sickness absence using organisation policies and systems

- analyse sickness absence data looking for trends or warning signs

- lead by example by following policies correctly i.e. flexible working, taking breaks

- escalate issues and source support for staff where appropriate in a timely manner

- ensure your team know the policies, behaviour and engagement expected of them

- ensure your team know to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing

- foster an open and inclusive culture in your team and workplace

- don't put off difficult conversations

- don't cancel meetings with your staff unless completely avoidable.

Effective management

There are simple ways to manage your team more effectively. They don't require time or money, and most you can start right away. Supporting your staff by saying thank you for a job well done and creating a culture of openness can make a difference in promoting wellbeing among your staff.
Make time for positive reinforcement for example, say 'Thank you', or 'Tough shift, thanks for your support' etc.

If you have time say well done, ask what positives they will take away from today, or what they are most pleased about. This allows them to reflect on their personal sense of achievement and allows you the opportunity as their manager to say well done. We automatically focus on the negative and the one thing we could have done better. Let your staff leave work focussing on what they did well, and that they had the opportunity to share this with you.

Be consistent

As a manager, you will have potentially difficult or challenging conversations with staff from time to time. Act when this is needed, taking an honest, open approach. Being consistent will ensure expectations are clear to all.

Listen and support

Supporting and empowering individual employees will strengthen the whole team. Try to set aside time to be available for your employees or if your own workload restricts this, allow for a minimum period of time during the week when you will be available and let your staff know. This reinforces that they are important because you have made them your priority. Often knowing this time is available if they need it can be enough to make your employees feel valued.

Manage the person, not their issue

Work with them to help them find a way forward, for example, what impact is this having? What could you do about it? What will you do about it? Keep an eye on your team's workload to ensure what they are expected to deliver is realistic within the timescales. Rather than taking problems off the employee, build up their resilience instead by empowering them to find the solution.

Keep things in perspective

Sometimes, both staff and managers come up against tough challenges and it feels like things are against you. However, being the voice of reason for your staff can prevent these concerns escalating. Be ready to ask your staff what alternative perspective could there be. What is their perception based on? What do they want to do to move forward?

Set up your managers' toolbox

As a manager, you won't have all the answers and shouldn't expect yourself to. What you can do is know who your key stakeholders are and who your employee can approach to assist them. This could include HR, OH, OD, counselling, health and safety reps etc. Keeping your colleagues informed of where they can seek the help they might need will help them feel more supported.

Make metrics your friend

A metric is a unit of measurement - for example, how many patients are there on the ward at any given time. When there is more than one metric (measure) it allows you to make a comparison. Metrics help you to understand what is going on but it only becomes useful when you do something with it. Key questions to ask are: what impact is this metric having on my staff, or patient care? Do I need to talk to my staff about this metric so I can understand the context of this and the impact this is having? If you have a lot of metrics and you are not clear how to use them effectively or what they are telling you, ask someone who uses them (for instance another manager) and then metrics can become useful to you and your team. For further information see the Using metrics section.

Create a culture of openness and engagement

A good manager will lead their team by example. Ensure you set clear goals and expectations for your team, so you are all working toward the same purpose. Try to make your staff feel valued and involved in your organisation and give them opportunities to feed back their views. Make sure you know how to manage common health problems effectively i.e. mental health issues, musculoskeletal problems. Finally, take steps to manage your own personal health and wellbeing and to build up your resilience. The section on resilience may help you here.

Using metrics

Metrics are all about making raw and basic data easy to interpret and understand. They help you recognise good practise and spot areas that you need to improve on. They can be anything from a simple spreadsheet to a really complex set of data and formulae. They are readily available and used regularly by analysts as well as all sorts of managers within the NHS who find them invaluable. Using metrics lets you create simple visual summaries of important information, allowing you to present them clearly and flexibly to people who really need to see it, such as your board.

A good example of metrics in use are the national sickness absence rates that the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) create every quarter. These spreadsheets are full of data but are still easy to read and categorised into organisation, organisation type, and area. They show clearly which organisations have low sickness absence and which ones are not doing so well. These are publicly available and free to download from their website and are very useful to compare your own organisation with others in terms of absence rates. This data shows which organisations are doing well, so you can make contact with them and improve your own policies and wellbeing programmes and reduce absence rates.

Metrics enable you to understand what is the current position of your organisation, but only become useful when you do something with the data you have gathered, such as planning your wellbeing strategy, challenge and inform your board, and help you map engagement for key stakeholders. Health and wellbeing can be measured using a number of metrics such as:

- staff sickness absence

- top five reasons for absence

- return to work meeting numbers

- vacancy establishment

- HR / OH interventions and referrals

- agency and bank staff usage

- staff survey response rates

- appraisal rates

- mandatory training rates

- induction rates.

All the above is really useful data, allowing you to target important areas and hot spots for interventions and developments. Key questions to ask are what impact is this metric having on my staff, or patient care? Do I

need to talk to my staff about this metric so I can understand the context of this and the impact this is having?

Engagement and communication

Engaging staff during a period of major change is a huge challenge for NHS organisations. Research shows that rapid change may lead individuals to feel overwhelmed or left behind. This section covers how best to communicate with your team and explains the benefits of developing resilience.

Engaging staff during a period of major change is a huge challenge for NHS organisations. Research shows that rapid change may lead individuals to feel overwhelmed or left behind. This is especially true in the NHS where many staff have worked there for many years. Concerns are also heightened when some changes are outside of the control of individual organisations or may even result in the organisation they work for being abolished. There are some actions that can be taken to mitigate the impact of change and seek to engage staff:

Communicate well

Staff response to change will depend partly on how the changes are communicated. In some cases organisations are facing an external change, over which they will have very little control e.g. abolition. In others, the organisation itself has decided to take action such as service reconfiguration and in some cases there will be a mix of externally imposed and internally directed change e.g. mergers of community services. You as a manager, along with your HR team, can play a vital role through induction briefings with your staff to alleviate their worries and support them.

Maintain staff engagement

The pace and scale of change in the NHS is increasing and may seem overwhelming to staff. Many staff will have seen proposals for change before and may be suffering from change fatigue and be sceptical of

new proposals, but organisations that involve and engage with staff early on generally find it can help deliver better outcomes. Listen to concerns, take on board feedback and communicate updates in a timely manner to keep your team on track. Reassure your staff that their concerns are being heard.

It may be difficult in maintaining relationships where staff have opposed potential changes but you should seek to keep an open and frank dialogue around implementation of any changes where possible. You therefore need to engage your staff around change and try to convey any case for change in a way which seeks to take staff along with them. This means being consistent in your messages and communication, building organisation by acting with integrity and being open about any risks. Evidence from public service organisations is that maintaining a focus on service delivery during change is key to motivating staff. Despite the range of changes in the NHS, your priority as a team will continue to be the provision of high quality healthcare services and better patient care.

Developing resilience

Resilience is one way of dealing with change, building up the ability of your staff to cope with the processes of change itself through personal resilience. The concept of resilience was originally developed to look at how organisations dealt with emergencies. There is now a considerable amount of current research and debate over how to increase resilience for individuals and in periods of rapid change. It is also important to address health and well-being issues during a period of change as these have been shown to affect engagement and staff motivation. Further information can be found in the Resilience section.

Presenteeism

Some staff struggle to cope with the day-to-day challenges of the job, stress, cost and budget cutting and organisational restructures - and feel that they must attend work even when they feel ill, or work beyond their usual working hours to meet deadlines. This is known as presenteeism, and it is occurring more often in the NHS today.

Presenteeism can be especially prevalent in:

A decline in absenteeism may seem to be positive, but not when it shifts to an increase in presenteeism. For instance, if a sick staff member is coming into work when they really should be recovering at home, it could expose them to further sickness. It could also lead to serious mental health issues for the person who is trying to do more work. The pressure of pushing themselves to work though ill health or do more hours can lead to exhaustion and can easily mount up, with them ultimately being unable to perform their duties fully, resulting in a loss of productivity for the team as a whole.

As a line manager you are crucial to solving the problem of presenteeism, as staff can often feel under pressure from managers to work whilst they are ill and not let the team down. Quite often there can be a culture within a team to project a certain 'image' or for an individual to feel uncomfortable asking for help and support.

A key point to managing this problem is challenging the attitudes of your team. Make sure your staff have a balanced workload with a sense of control over how it is delivered. Good working relationships are also vital, so have an open door policy in place with your staff to help you maintain communication. Your staff should be able to take the time off they need to recover, handing over duties to other team members and they need to be aware of this expectation from you as a manager.

- close-knit teams - such as friends or family, long time colleagues

- teams with competitive cultures or strict targets/deadlines (i.e. sales)

- caring occupations offering services to others – doctors, nurses, carers

- roles where an individual feels they cannot be replaced or their work cannot be covered should they be absent

- teams that are under intense pressure to succeed.