

Impact of change of health, safety & wellbeing

Health and safety problems tend to arise around poorly thought out and implemented changes to job design, organisation and management of work. The impact often results in physical and psychological harm to staff as outlined below:

Experiencing Stress

Change can be a major cause of stress when employers fail to provide information or consult with staff about their plans. When there is job uncertainty, some may find this worrying and if this state of uncertainty is prolonged, it can lead to them experiencing stress related illness such as anxiety, depression and cardiovascular disease. Stressed staff also tend to make mistakes, and have more accidents.

There may be an adverse impact on other staff expected to cover for the stressed colleague who has gone off sick. They may face an increase in demand, which pushes them to work faster or longer. If these demands are unrelenting or viewed as unreasonable, a continuing spiral of stress and ill health may result.

Musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders

MSK disorders is the most common cause of workplace illness in the UK. The back and upper limbs are usually the most vulnerable to injury and pain. The problem are often made worse when changes are made to how staff work or new technology introduced without sufficient consultation, or assessment of individual need. The impact of the change may not be fully realised until it is too late as staff start experiencing a gradual onset of muscular pain and related injuries. An example of this is staff using portable devices on the go or feel pressured by workload considerations to reduce their down time between manual handling treatments of patients, which undermines ability to recover. Proper risk/ impact assessment undertaken by a competent person is essential before staff change the way they work.

Work Environment

The impact of several years of cost restraint in the NHS has led employers to make changes to where and how staff work. Two different approaches are often used. They try to economise on office accommodation by increasing the number of staff expected to share space and work stations. Alternatively, or sometimes additionally the employer introduces increased remote lone working with the provision of portable electronic devices that are not always appropriate to the employee's individual needs.

Cramped working conditions can result in:

- Increased likelihood of slips and trips accidents, for example through inadequate provision of storage for staff's personal belongings and equipment.
- Increased stress through struggling to hear and communicate with others in a noisy distracting environment in particular hampering them in ensuring patient properly understands what is going on regarding their condition and treatment. Additionally there may be confidentiality considerations, if they are disclosing personal details about patients to others not involved in their case.
- Compromising safety standards. For example, staff obstruct fire exits with equipment or their belongings due to lack of space to store items more appropriately.

The potential risks confronting staff working alone include:

- Isolation and loss of support networks with other colleagues and management.
- Violence and aggression from patients, their relatives and members of the public.

What Safety Reps can do

Before a restructuring, the safety rep can:

- 1 Check your employer's policy on organisational change. Does it include reference to how potential health and safety problems will be identified and resolved
- 2 Ensure consultation on changes that could affect health and safety are included as part of the health and safety Committee's remit.
- 3 Get relevant information and support from their contact with Estates, Infection Control, Health and Safety Advisers, other safety reps
- 4 Meet or survey members to understand how the change may affect their health and wellbeing
- 5 Access the employer's risk or impact assessment of the plan/proposals and if needed, remind managers of the safety rep's right to be consulted under clause 4A of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977.
- 6 Circulate CSP advice sheets to members on relevant health and safety issues, for example, CSP stress advice sheets on what members can do about change, or demands at work.

During consultation, the safety rep can:

- 1 Keep the issue on the agenda of the workplace safety committee
- 2 Undertake workplace Inspections to identify the hazards arising from the proposed changes and report these in writing to managers and members.
- 3 Review employer's risk assessments or request a risk assessment if there has not been one done.

- 4 Provide feedback to managers on any member health, safety or wellbeing concerns and when appropriate offer recommendations on how to improve or resolve any problems arising.
- 5 Ensure the employer provides and meets the costs of staff's training needs arising from any changes to their job role.
- 6 Check communication between managers and members is effective. Are members getting enough information about the proposals? Are managers actively seeking solutions to resolve members' concerns when raised?

After implementation, the safety rep can:

- 1 Do a workplace inspection. The activity could include body mapping or running a stress survey with members, or reviewing recent sickness absence records, since the introduction of the change to see the impact on members' health and wellbeing.
- 2 Ensure (if there has been any incidences) that management provide the expected incident data to the Health & Safety committee
- 3 Review management's stress audit or relevant risk assessment. If the information is out of date to ask for the audit or assessment to be re-done.
- 4 Raise members' concerns through the appropriate communication/management hierarchy.
- 5 Work with stewards and members to resolve problems that have arisen because of the change, using their role as an accredited safety rep to get employers to understand their duty of care under any relevant health and safety regulation that may apply.