UK National Work-stress Conference 2005
WORKSHOP REPORTS

The remit of Workgroups was deliberately wide to enable free discussion of the many issues raised in the morning session. Many of the points raised in discussion were repeated in all groups. To avoid repetition, similar points have not been re-iterated or have been mentioned only in passing, in the following reports.

GROUP A

The Group focussed on the practical challenges of implementing a stress policy in the workplace and some of the issues that would need to be addressed. The training of line managers, particularly at middle levels, and the influencing of management style was seen as a key objective although it was acknowledged that some managers themselves were under stress and additional responsibilities of this kind might tend to increase unhealthy pressures.

The impact of absence management policies on levels of workplace stress was discussed. Where these were used in a supportive way to enable a phased return to work after illness (particularly stress-related illness) they were seen as making a helpful contribution to the management of workplace stress levels. However, where implemented insensitively or aggressively they could actually add to the problem.

The status accorded to workers was seen as an issue worth addressing. The example of the relationship between teachers and classroom support workers was given as an example. It was very important that all workers were accorded dignity in their place of work.

Unrealistic production targets and general workplace organisation contributed greatly to levels of stress in a workforce and needed to be tackled by trade union organisation.

Inexpert handling of discipline and grievance procedures by poorly trained management was an important cause of stressed workplaces.

Stressed Workplaces

Stress is a sign of a sick workplace and needs to be tackled under health and safety legislation in the same way as other hazards. The complaints of individuals who raise issues related to workplace organisation need to be taken seriously and the issues dealt with. The effective training of managers needs to be a priority in all workplaces.

Employers need to realise that often workers in the front line know more about work-related issues than their managers. This great resource should be used more effectively than at present.

Training aims

- Identifying stress problems
- Knowledge of strategies to tackle stress
- Realisation of the interface between work and home
- The development of listening skills
- Ability to recognise achievement as well as failure
- Ability to identify training and professional development needs in all workers
- Ability to negotiate rather than impose targets for development and performance.

Occupational Health

The provision of occupational health services by employers was discussed and, in this context the provision of stress counselling. The issue of confidentiality was identified as the key. Occupational health services could be a sword aimed at the neck of workers or a shield to guard them from the unhealthy consequences of working practices.

GROUP B

A number of issues were discussed within the Group. Some saw the introduction of the Management Standards by HSE as a helpful step in the right direction. They felt optimistic that the Standards gave workplace representatives another set of tools, which could be used to influence management behaviour. Poor management was seen as a prime cause of workplace stress. Many mangers were very ignorant about the issues of workplace stress and at a loss to either identify the causes or to tackle them. The Workplace Standards, in this context, were a useful template for action.

Others were more pessimistic about the impact of the Management Standards. They were disappointed that after the lapse of so much time such a weak, non-statutory document should have been produced by HSE. This group regarded HSE as wildly optimistic if they thought that employers and managers generally would be roused to action by the documents, worthy though they were. The crucial issue now would be the attitude of HSE Inspectors on the ground and their willingness to take strong enforcement action under other health and safety legislation were employers were seen to be ignoring the guidance.

The group agreed that the Standards did nothing to tackle the underlying weakness of the law in the area of work-induced mental illness. There was a need to continue the campaign for effective regulation and, at the very least, for the introduction of a statutory Code of Practice.

The contribution to levels of mental illness in the workplace made by poor relationships between workers and poor industrial relations was discussed.

The impact of domestic problems on levels of stress amongst workers was discussed. It was felt that the drawing of too rigid a line between home and work was

unhelpful and that good employers can and do contribute to assisting workers overcome problems that have their roots outside the factory gate. A number of examples were given of workplace policies to assist, for example, workers suffering from violence in the home.

This group also discussed the impact of 'return to work' policies, which in some cases could add to the problem of work-related stress illnesses rather than solve them.

Both informal and institutional bullying in some workplaces remains a serious problem.

The best employers were those who had a good organisation and a focus on valuing and caring for their workforce at every stage from appointment to retirement. Whilst we must recognise the failure of many employers to care for the mental health of workers, we should not forget that there are other employers making real efforts in this direction and this should be applauded.

GROUP C

This group expressed grave concerns that the Management Standards are a voluntary code and believed that the Network should continue to campaign to make the Code statutory. There seemed to be no system in place to monitor the effectiveness of the Code and this was seen as a major deficiency.

The process of risk assessment under the Management Regulations was seen a key. In the best situations management and unions with each receiving the same level of training carried this out jointly.

Counselling schemes were seen as making a contribution to workplace health providing these were not being used as a smokescreen to hide lack of action to tackle the sources of workplace stress.

The importance of good managers was recognised and their need for effective training, particularly in 'people skills'.

Some people present in the Group had not heard about the Management Standards until today. Considering that the Group represented the most active section of the workforce this was seen as greatly worrying and an indictment of the failure of HSE to launch their proposals properly. This suggested that many employers would also not have heard of the Standards. Good employers were probably already complying and others will probably take no notice of non-statutory guidance of this sort. It would be helpful if courts would at least take the Standards in to consideration when considering cases before them.

The Group discussed the issue of 'return to work' interviews and bullying and many of the points raised by other groups re-iterated.

The stigma attached to mental illness and the reluctance of workers to admit to being under stress was discussed. In this context the ambivalent position of workplace based OH services was discussed. To whom should they be responsible – worker or employer?

GROUP D

The desirability of having a stress policy in the workplace was emphasised. This could be drawn up following a joint employer/union confidential stress survey to identify particular issues.

If policies are to be effective then adequate training is essential. It is very important that the writing of a stress policy is not seen as the end of the process but as the beginning of an on going and closely monitored process.

The impact of workplace OH services was discussed. Some saw such services as a threat and others as a valuable support. This depended very much on the way the service was organised and the degree of confidentiality accorded to workers.

The Management Standards were seen as inadequate in themselves to tackle the problem of stress in the workplace although it was recognised that they had a contribution to make. There was no substitute for effective legislation. We should continue to demand an ACOP at the very least.

It was very important that effective enforcement action was taken by HSE where employers failed to take adequate steps to tackle mental health issues in the workplace

The general issue of work-life balance was seen by many as closely bound up with the problems of work-induced mental illness. We should pay some attention to these issues.