

Information Release – National Work-Stress Network presentation to All Party Group of MPs and Peers on Occupational Health & Safety – House of Commons, July 4th 2012

We were invited to address the group as a follow up to a letter to all members and copies of the Stress Booklet, sent in the spring. I began by giving a brief outline of the background to the Network, how we had worked largely on Education & Stress but had now moved to a much broader remit and referred to our Hazards connections in UK and EWHN.

Our basic premise is that employer duty of care applies across the board for all aspects of work-related illness, accident and threats to wellbeing and welfare. We believe that many employers are failing in that duty of care, and are totally ignorant of the need for full and proper risk assessments, the requirement for dignity in the workplace, and for proper recognition that excessive demand, unrelenting pressure on workers has become a serious killer.

That means:-

- o seriously damaging effects to physical and mental health of employees;
 - o breakdown of immune systems as the body reacts more and more to the [perceived] need to keep going;
 - o huge costs of protracted sickness absence to employers, employees and the economy;
 - o continuously rising costs of benefits where mental health has been so seriously damaged as to prevent any future work;
 - o early cardiac problems and associated ailments and sudden premature deaths; and
 - o suicides brought about by the impact on wellbeing and mental health and often as a result of workplace bullying.
- There is a wealth of evidence from reputable bodies such as HSE, NICE, CIPD, MIND and others together with much well documented research which suggests that we no longer need to be told what is wrong. Strong enforceable action needs to take place to prevent any further spread of this major problem.
 - Additionally the annual Labour Force Survey outcomes together with the TUC Safety Reps Surveys show that Stress remains a major item for concern. We in our work around the country find countless groups of employees who are struggling to keep heads above water. This is more so since the impact of the 2008 recession and financial collapses as well as the post recession and post election austerity measures.
 - Presenteeism is on the increase – creating further damage to productivity and the economy. The Royal College of Psychologists estimated that it costs the economy over £15bn as against £8bn costs of absenteeism.

- Europe-wide research has recently shown that Stress levels continue to rise across the EU, and that UK - with its longest working-hours culture remains at high risk.
- Historically there have been key legal cases where employers' negligence and failures to act in response to cries for help, and although this route has become more challenging, it is clear that there are employers out there who totally disregard their responsibilities and remain indifferent to the plight of their workforce.
- We want to see:-
 - Greater understanding and acceptance that Stress-related illnesses are a major threat to the well-being and welfare of many thousands of workers their employment and their families who carry and share the burden of distress;
 - An end to the current mantra that "most workplaces are automatically places of safety" – they are not, when employers and managers can get away with excessive unreasonable demand, badly managed change, bullying and harassing techniques that bring people to suicide and premature death;
 - Greater profile to the HSE Stress Management Standards with some realistic and effective enforcement, and a strengthening of the standards to ACoP level or equivalent;
 - Acceptance that guidance alone does not seem to work, nor does an assumption that employers will always do what is in the best interests of their employees;
 - Re-injection of funding into the HSE in order to ensure that it can carry out its statutory duties effectively and efficiently.

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<http://www.workstress.net/>