

Making workplace wellbeing a priority for the NHS

Happiness and wellbeing of NHS staff is critical to the quality of care they can provide for patients and communities. It is important for healthcare leaders and local policy makers to continue to foster a nurturing and supportive work culture to enable staff to practice to the best of their abilities and provide safe, sustainable and patient-centred care. This article outlines strategies to improve the NHS as a place of work.

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Happiness matters

Better morale and motivation of medical staff has a positive impact on patient outcome and experiences, as well as providing cost savings to the NHS (Royal College of Physicians, 2015). With increasing financial burden and growing uncertainty within the NHS, staff are under unprecedented pressure (Boorman, 2009). In this environment, healthcare leaders must ensure that a nurturing and supportive working environment is created to enable the provision of safe, sustainable, patient-centred care. Local policy change should be complemented with national diktats designed to improve and monitor happiness and engagement levels of employees, and encourage a culture for positive change.

Strategies of wellbeing from other sectors can be adopted within healthcare to make happiness a central philosophy within the NHS and improve retention, productivity and patient care. This editorial explores how we can make the NHS a better place to work.

Staff morale in the NHS

Staff morale remains a concern within the NHS because of issues including increasing workload, financial pressure, feeling undervalued and clinician burnout (Royal College of Physicians, 2015). The results of the 2018 NHS Staff Survey showed that 40% of staff reported being unwell as a result of work-related stress and 57% of staff attended work despite not feeling well enough to perform their duties (National NHS Staff Survey Coordination Centre, 2018). Bullying from managers was experienced by 13% of staff and bullying from colleagues by 19%, but only 29% of staff felt their organisation took proactive action to improve health and wellbeing (National NHS Staff Survey Coordination Centre, 2018). Given the relationship between staff engagement and patient health outcomes, low staff morale is an increasingly important concern that should be addressed by healthcare leaders.

Lessons from other industries

Implementing meaningful change to address current shortcomings in the NHS can be a challenge. Shifting perceptions on wellbeing requires fresh and innovative ideas, and seeking inspiration from other industries to create an engaged workforce.

Ensuring employee physical and mental wellbeing

Changing attitudes to wellness and taking collective action to improve working conditions for staff is imperative. The tech industry has consistently reported high levels of job satisfaction and staff morale, which may be associated with the employee perks these companies provide (Fox, 2016). Google, who are often referred to as an exemplar, offer employee benefits including free onsite food services, extended paternity and maternity leave, decompression capsules for rest, recreational facilities, and access to financial services (Brooks, 2018). These employee wellness packages have translated into better staff morale and productivity, with Google topping 'Fortune's Best Companies to Work For' list for six consecutive years and 86% of employees reporting job satisfaction (Brooks, 2018).

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Although operating under greater financial constraint, the NHS can implement tailored wellbeing initiatives to boost staff motivation and encourage work–life balance. Currently, clinician fatigue is a major challenge in the NHS. A national survey found that 70% of respondents felt fatigue had impacted their mental health and personal relationships, 84% felt too exhausted to drive home safely after a night shift, and less than one third had access to suitable rest facilities in hospital (McClelland et al, 2017).

Industries such as aviation and transport have introduced workplace fatigue management systems to better recognise the importance of rest and sleep hygiene (Waclawski and Noone, 2017). Initiatives such as the ‘HALT: Take a Break’ campaign and resources by the Royal College of Physicians have promoted better management of clinician fatigue (British Medical Association, 2018). In 2019, the Fight Fatigue campaign was launched to support a positive institutional attitude towards rest. Dr Kathleen Ferguson, president of the Association of Anaesthetists, noted: ‘Our campaign seeks to change attitudes across the NHS to ensure everyone understands the risks of fatigue and how to mitigate them. We hope that by collectively taking responsibility for making changes to working practice, we can improve working conditions for staff which will in turn benefit patient care’ (Royal College of Physicians, 2019).

Developing leaders in wellness

Inspired by Google’s ‘Chief Happiness Officer,’ a growing number of companies have developed roles within their organisations dedicated to employee happiness. The appointment of the first NHS Chief People Officer demonstrates the NHS’s commitment to empower leaders to make a difference on improving NHS workplace challenges (Gerada, 2019). At a local level, trusts can ensure visible leadership through creating a position for a workplace wellbeing champion in every NHS organisation. As the first point of contact for wellbeing concerns, this role involves undertaking regular check-ins and confidential discussions, especially following adverse clinical incidents and fitness to practice investigations. They can also serve as a representative in decision-making processes to influence policy change and make employee engagement a standing agenda item at executive meetings.

Focusing on mental health

The British Medical Association (2018) declared poor mental health of employees as a major national healthcare issue. One third of UK doctors suffer from burnout and doctors have reported the highest levels of work-related mental health issues and suicide compared to the wider population (McKinley et al, 2020).

The NHS has made some progress in tackling workplace wellbeing. Following a national review, the General Medical Council released a report identifying key factors impacting wellbeing and outlining recommendations to improve workplaces for doctors and medical students (West and Coia, 2018). The Interim NHS People Plan proposes a set of actions to tackle work culture and lays the groundwork for supporting staff (NHS Improvement, 2019). As part of the NHS Long Term Plan, Practitioner Health was launched, a free, confidential service for doctors and dentists with mental health concerns (NHS Improvement, 2019).

Developing schemes to support open, interdisciplinary dialogue on mental health and other workplace challenges is important. Schwartz rounds have been introduced in UK hospitals – these are an evidence-based forum where all staff meet regularly to discuss and reflect upon the emotional and social challenges of their everyday careers in a safe space (Cornwell and Goodrich, 2012). Attitudes towards mental health are changing, and the NHS should make proactive, long-term changes to create a workplace environment conducive to the mental wellbeing of its employees.

Feeling valued

Evidence from a range of industries suggests that a more valued and supported workforce performs better (Ham, 2014). The NHS Staff Survey results show that only 42% of NHS staff felt valued by their employer, and staff turnover rates are worsening (National NHS Staff Survey Coordination Centre, 2018). The NHS must make efforts to empower frontline staff to improve morale and retention. For example, they could implement reward schemes and

Key points

- Better staff morale has positive impacts on patient outcomes and experiences.
- Currently, staff morale and engagement is a concern within the NHS that must be addressed by healthcare leaders.
- NHS leaders should use learning from other sectors to prioritise happiness and harness the power of a highly engaged work force and provide high-quality care.
- Mental and physical wellbeing initiatives, including fatigue management systems, are important.
- NHS trusts can appoint workplace wellbeing leaders to create visibility of issues and accountability.
- Wellbeing interventions should be monitored to ensure sustainability and long-term impact.

value employee input in high-level decision-making processes around service improvement to encourage engagement and innovation.

Frimley Park Hospital have consistently scored among the highest for staff engagement, patient satisfaction and teamwork in the NHS (Care Quality Commission, 2018). The Trust established a clear set of organisational values through a staff-led process to draw on individual knowledge, insight and experience, and incorporate this into staff recruitment, induction, appraisal processes, and service improvement (Ham, 2014).

Many companies have schemes to recognise and reward employees. Accenture, a multinational company, offers a programme that aims to celebrate high performance by providing employees with reward points that can be redeemed for merchandise or services (Barrett, 2017). Across all industries, thanking and praising individual achievements through appraisals, career development opportunities, peer-to-peer recognition from colleagues and senior leadership can make staff feel more valued. Positive feedback highlights good practice and can create a stronger and more beneficial rapport between colleagues.

Long-term impact

The impact of wellbeing interventions and services should be continuously monitored and reviewed to ensure long-term change. Companies such as Deloitte have worked with Mind to engage in the Workplace Wellbeing Index (Deloitte, 2017). This is a benchmark for best practice, designed to assess the workplace mental wellbeing of an organisation against good standards to help employers identify gaps in their practice. It provides an assessment report highlighting strengths, areas for improvement, and implementable recommendations. This index enables external validation of efforts in wellbeing and the opportunity to share and access best practice from other participating organisations. The NHS can adopt a similar framework to identify areas of improvement, undertake health checks and implement best employment practices.

A happy workforce is a productive workforce

NHS staff are working in high-pressure work environments, and often simple changes can make a big impact on happiness and wellbeing. It is important to address the underlying causes of decreasing staff morale and an unhealthy work culture in healthcare. NHS leaders must strengthen their approach to workplace wellbeing with insight from other industries and harness the power of a highly engaged workforce to find joy and reward in their career.

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