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Any senior management trainee (or junior for that matter) will tell you that the way to manage sickness is to create a culture of motivation, teamwork, empowerment and ownership within the workforce that will encourage staff to attend work even if they feel a little down or under the weather, so sickness becomes the last option instead of the first.

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This culture, allied to a policy that requires return to work meetings to each individual period of sickness and then a steady escalation of the disciplinary procedure tagged into episodes of sick leave, this all supported by an active occupational health department and a management will to consistently apply across the board. So easily sorted then.....

Another factor to consider in the management of sickness in these days of agenda for change is the significant levels of annual leave, bank holidays and special leave allowances, add any sick leave to these absences and the levels of attendance can be pitiful in too many cases.

Therefore, poor sickness levels allied with legitimate leave could lose a Trust 3 months or more of attendance in some cases.

NHS policies also tend to be very long winded procedures which are slow to process and follow through and can take excessive management hours to implement.

When you compare the above with NHS contractors who manage some of our lowest paid workers such as domestics and preside over levels of sickness of 1 ½ to 3 % .

Are these achieved by robustly applying a good policy in conjunction with an appropriate management culture well yes, in a way, when that policy dictates that there is no pay on the first day of sickness.

My experience of NHS sickness is that if you do all that is advocated in the first couple of paragraphs you will decrease your sickness levels but the only way to produce dramatic outcomes is to support the incentives with a few more sticks when you take sick leave. The NHS provide all the support and paid leave but none of the disincentives that could really reduce sickness levels.

Would the NHS as a whole be brave enough to start adopting radical measures such as this? Unpaid sickness, reduced leave I very much doubt it. However, the sickness targets and associated cost savings that will be set can only be achieved if they do.