

## Stress in the NHS workforce – what to do?

Whichever way you slice the rhetoric of the politicians or dice the interpretations of the media commentators, the NHS is fast tracking for yet another major organisational upheaval, possibly the biggest since 1974. Combine this with some of the worst economic times since the inception of the NHS itself, then the healthcare waters ahead can only be described as uncertain and potentially very turbulent.

Although the recent White Paper is entitled ‘Liberating the NHS’, the NHS workforce may not be in the same mood to share such optimistic sentiments. In fact, as one of the largest global employers of around 1.4 million people, the NHS may well be about to experience an inevitable rise in stress that will impact on an employee’s physical and mental health. Although the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published guidance for employers on promoting mental wellbeing in 2009

<http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/12331/45893/45893.pdf> a recent BMJ article [BMJ

2010;340:c1743doi:10.1136/bmj.c1743] felt more concrete guidance was required.

Stress is not easy to measure compared to other major causes of chronic disease eg. physical activity, smoking, poor nutrition, excess alcohol and often they are inter-related.

The recent Boorman report

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_108799](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_108799) has helped advance the debate for the NHS by emphasising that staff health and well

During a 24 hour period, our body undergoes a period of both physical and non-physical load.

being is more than just absence of disease, it is a balance between achieving physical, mental and social contentment. As an initiative towards this balance, the launch of NHS

Sport and Physical Activity Challenge for all NHS staff [www.sportandphysicalactivity.nhs.uk](http://www.sportandphysicalactivity.nhs.uk) had an Olympian kick off in July at the Emirates Stadium in London. The aim is for NHS staff to capitalise on the inspirational power of the London 2012 Olympic and Para Olympic Games and create a lasting legacy leading up to and beyond 2012 and to use this as a catalyst for change.

Although a healthy start, if Boorman’s belief that sickness absence in the NHS can be reduced by a third, what other tools are required to achieve this target in the uncertain climate we are entering? Building on the 2012 initiative, a multi-faceted approach is required to address being more physically fit, lighter in stature and more at peace with ourselves, both at work and at home.

Much is written about the first two, with plenty of guidance at both a professional and lay level available. However, the science of stress and its reduction in the workplace is in its infancy. Its impact on organisations and how efficiently they function is crucial to performance, whether it being quality of care delivered, patient safety or even the all important bottom line.

So let's look at one aspect of being able to cope with the stresses of everyday life; recovery. It may seem a simple assertion, but the better our quality of sleep, the better our recovery. The better our recovery, the better we perform the next day and the less likely are we to suffer from stress, illness and general lethargy.

During a 24 hour period, our body undergoes a period of both physical and non-physical load. The physical load can include anything from day-to-day activity such as walking, gardening, sport. You name it, anything that includes movement can be counted as physical load. Non-physical load is more about the mental processes such as writing a report, chairing a meeting, getting the kids to do their homework.

The word stress is often used and this can be confusing as it is commonly perceived as bad. So with an accumulation of these two types of load, there is a need to recover, in fact recharge the body's batteries; and that's what sleep is all about.

Physiologically speaking, load typically results with increased activation of the sympathetic nervous system whereas effective recovery and sleep requires the parasympathetic nervous system to kick in.

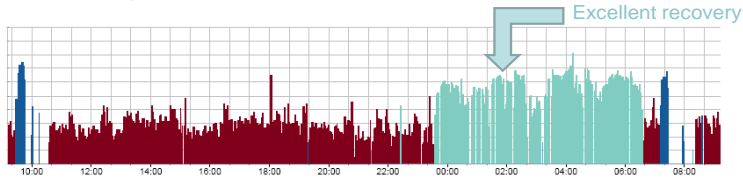
Associated with this balancing act are a number of physiological parameters such as heart rate, heart rate variability, blood pressure and a number of hormone levels. Although sympathetic activity tends to be dominant over a 24 hour period, it is the absence or reduction in parasympathetic activity that suggest the body is not recovering and coping with daily load. If this status is prolonged, then the individual is susceptible to becoming 'exhausted, burnt out, run down and stressed'.

If such an outcome is occurring at an organisational level, this over time leads to a workforce that is dysfunctional, non-productive and unhappy. So how can stress be prevented? The key is moving away from hypotheses and harnessing objective measurements. The chart below provides an example of objective measurement where the light blue colour in the top graph represents parasympathetic activity and hence good recovery during sleep between midnight and 8am. In contrast, 24 hours later, the same individual went to sleep at the same time but his sleep period is red and represents sympathetic activity and poor recovery. These measurements have been derived from measuring heart rate and heart rate variability over a 24 hour period.

## Physiologically coping?

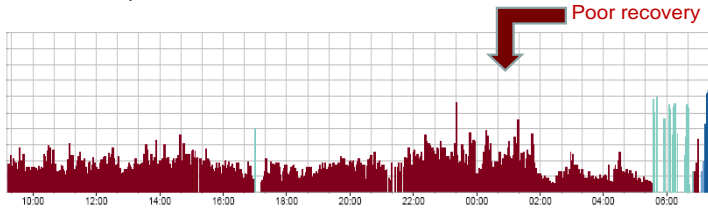


Stress and Recovery Chart



## Physiologically stressed?

Stress and Recovery Chart



Such objective measurement will support senior management emphasise the importance of strategies to reduce stress and improve recovery that results in a better performing workforce. This requires education, reinforcement and leadership.

So if Boorman's recommendation that *'all NHS organisations provide staff health and well-being services that are centred on prevention (of both work-related and lifestyle-influenced ill-health)...*' then a proactive policy towards stress and recovery will need to play centre stage.

If you would like to discuss this further, then please contact me.

Dr Simon Wallace

[simonwallace@optima-life.com](mailto:simonwallace@optima-life.com)

[www.optima-life.com](http://www.optima-life.com)