

Text n°13

Sick leave costs NHS ⁽¹⁾ £1.7bn a year

NHS staff take more time off than other workers, frequently because of anxiety and depression

The highest rates of sickness are among those who work hardest.

Photograph: Murdo Macleod/Guardian

Huge savings could be made if the NHS could reduce the amount of sick leave taken by staff, which costs the service £1.7bn a year, a report says today.

But the government-commissioned interim report, by occupational health expert Dr Steve Boorman, also reveals that many NHS staff struggle in to work when they feel unwell.

The Boorman report presents a picture of an NHS where staff fall sick not only because of the proximity of illness but also as a result of pressure and stress.

More days are lost through staff sickness in the NHS than elsewhere in the public sector – 10.3 million days a year, which is an average of around 10.7 days a year for each employee, compared to a public sector average of 9.7 days. The average in the private sector is 6.4 days a year.

Cutting sick leave even by a third could save the health service a substantial amount of money that could be spent on patient care, says the report. "A reduction of a third would mean an extra 3.4 million working days a year, and annual direct cost savings of over half a billion pounds (£555m)."

The highest rates of sickness were among those who worked hardest = more than eight hours a day. Those who had worked for a long time for the NHS were more likely to report sick, and women had higher sickness absenteeism than men.

Staff did pick up infections from patients, but this did not account for the high rates of sick leave. "Nearly half of all NHS staff absence is accounted for by musculoskeletal disorders, and more than a quarter by stress, depression

and anxiety," says the report. "Most staff believe that their state of health affects patient care."

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1) NHS = National Health Service

1. Read the text and present it
2. Compare the situation mentioned in the text with that of your country