

WORK stress

The UK National Work-stress Network • workstress.net

Newsletter 2013: New Year Edition



Conference Report – November 2012

Once again the Stress Network Conference welcomed 80+ delegates and speakers/workshop facilitators in the comfortable surroundings of Hillscourt Conference Centre, for discussion and debate around this year's theme: ***Hard Times, Great Expectations and Victorian Values – combatting workplace stress in hostile times.***

We place on record our grateful thanks to Hillscourt staff, and to host organization NASUWT for enabling us to hold this event. Conference was well supported by many unions at branch and regional levels. We are always happy to welcome back regular participants as well as providing a new experience for those who are with us for their first time.

Presentations used by speakers in the sessions are available as pdf files on our web site: brief summaries follow.

Saturday Morning Plenary Session

Conference was chaired by Sue Bennett of the Stress Network and she welcomed in turn our guest speakers.

The first session was a short introduction by **Vaughan Skirrey, Deputy Convenor of the Network**. He explained how the Network came into being, its work and its total reliance on donation and sponsorship, there being no regular income, nor paid staff. Vaughan emphasized that the Network welcomes new blood and support, to enable us to carry forward our message and to share in the not so onerous duties that keep us going.

If you have a little time to spare and think you might be able to become actively involved with no more than 4 or 5 meetings in a year on a Saturday morning, then please get in touch. If you can obtain sponsorship for your travelling costs and accommodation needs then that will help to keep our costs down.

Professor Ralph Fevre of Cardiff University School of Social Sciences presented his joint research paper on *“Ill treatment in the workplace”*. The research took place during 2008, with a sample of 4,000 employees within 4 large employers including engineering, logistics and communications, financial services and an NHS Trust. The research questionnaires covered unreasonable management, incivility and disrespect and violence in the workplace.

Overall outcomes reported 5% experiencing physical violence; 50% reported unreasonable treatment and some 40% indicated experiences of incivility and disrespect.

Mike Bosman, PCS member working for the UK Border Agency covered the subject of *‘Mental Health and Illness in the Workplace’*, having himself been being diagnosed with rapid reactive bi-polar affective disorder in 2005. Mike explored with delegates the meaning of the terms ‘mental health’, and he displayed the WHO 2011 definition on the screen. He also explained that mental illness covered a range of different issues, including psychosis, neurosis, organic and other disorders. He included stress within the overall categories and reminded delegates of the HSE definition.

Bob Woods, Network Steering Group member, described the work undertaken in the last two recent conferences exploring the issues of stress for TU caseworkers. He noted that many unions provide ample advice on how to support and assist members, but very little to support the caseworkers themselves. It was frequently reported that ‘burn out’ amongst Stewards and Representatives was common and there was a general lack of appreciation from employers or the unions themselves.

The Network has published a guide sheet with a number of ‘Top Tips’ for Stewards to help protect them from undue pressures and demands being

made on their time and ability to respond to situations. This advice leaflet is on the network website and can be found free to download at <http://www.workstress.net/downloads/stewards%20stress%20handout.pdf>.

Scott Donohoe, Network member and with Glasgow City Council UNISON Branch, outlined a detailed example of how in recent years workers have complained and responded to union calls for action related to high stress levels in the public counter interface with the public of the city. Through concerted action by the Branch and its members, a full review of the causes of high rates of sickness absence and high stress levels was undertaken using HSE assessment tools which produced stark details of inadequacies and inefficiencies in management of the city council facility. Focus groups, TU liaison groups and branch meetings fed views into the melting pot and significant changes were implemented, and remain under review.

The concluding session of the plenary was addressed by **Les Roberts, Treasurer of the Stress Network**. Under the title of 'Victorian Values', Les examined how and why Health & Safety laws had become necessary; how they had impacted on the workforce in the past; and how the current government's programme of brutal destruction of so-called bureaucratic burdens on industry was putting the lives of workers at greater risk than almost ever before.

Les showed from HSE data that although the UK is reputed to have one of the best records in H&S, the figures for work-place illnesses, injuries and deaths confirm the fact that workplaces are not safe, despite what the government would have us believe. Self-reported stress-related illnesses and ailments have virtually doubled in 20 years, which is clear proof that the work the network has been doing is fully vindicated.

Government is hell-bent on destroying the fabric that has protected much of this society since the Robens Act of 1974 which introduced a safety regime that was ground breaking in its day. Self enforcement, destruction of compensation and employer strict liability laws would inevitably lead to more deaths, more work-related illnesses and accidents and more cowboy employers.

The morning session closed with a short period of questions and discussion.

Sunday morning, 25th November was drawn to a conclusion after the workshop sessions by **Ian Draper, Network Convenor**.

In his summary of the weekend, Ian highlighted how stress was now the "not so hidden killer", and focused on the concept that work should be health enhancing, no matter what the political or economic climate might be. He referred to the huge costs to society and the economy as reported in numerous sources. It was recognised that the costs of sickness absence were far outweighed by the effects of people not taking time off, and attending work, but in body only! Ian reminded conference of the continued onslaught by government against safety laws and how there was a concerted attack on TU rights and entitlements. He noted that since 1992, stress incidences had risen considerably especially in women, and that in the post recession period an even greater increase had been observed. Moving on to the more serious effects of stress, leading to premature heart disease, other illnesses and premature deaths, he reminded delegates that suicides connected to work-related stress were on the increase within the 16 to 44 male population.

In conclusion, Ian thanked everyone for their attendance and participation and specifically the support from the Steering Group and in particular Les Roberts for his very considerable work as Conference Secretary.

He wished everyone well and a safe journey home, and highlighted key diary dates for 2013:

UK Hazards Conference, Keele University: July 19th – 21st 2013

European Hazards Network Conference, October 4th - 6th, 2013 Bologna, Italy

Stress Network Conference, Hillscourt Conference Centre, November 22nd – 24th 2013

SIMON PICKVANCE

1949 - 2012

Simon Pickvance, a pioneer in occupational health services, died on 23rd November 2012, aged 63.

Ian Draper represented the Network at a memorial event for Simon held in Sheffield, where he had carried out so much of his pioneering work in occupational health. The

Memorial was attended by several hundred friends and family, and a wide range of tributes and fond memories brought both laughter and tears.

Simon, born in Birmingham, was educated at King Edward's school and went on to read natural sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge. He started a PhD in molecular biology with the Nobel Laureate Sydney Brenner - his work as a molecular biologist was noted in John Sulston's 2002 Nobel Prize lecture - but Simon later gave up laboratory research, joining the Radical Science Journal collective and becoming active in the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science.

He had been diagnosed with mesothelioma two years ago, a consequence of a one-time day job as a bricklayer, which he carried out while also developing innovative, worker-oriented occupational health support in primary care. This work led to the establishment of the ground-breaking Sheffield Occupational Health Advisory Service (SOHAS) - a model since copied elsewhere.

Simon also founded the Workers' Health International Newsletter, which consolidated international information exchange and cooperation between union and health and safety activists, sympathetic medics and scientists worldwide. Simon was particularly interested in work-stress and worked for recognition of the effects that excessive pressures have on the workforce. He was a friend of the Stress Network and chaired one of our annual conferences.

Simon will be sadly missed and our thoughts go out to his family and close friends.

Stress 'time bomb' ticking at Johnston Press

Overworked journalists facing a stress 'time bomb' at work are demanding urgent talks with Johnston Press after the company announced further massive cuts.

Journalists' union NUJ is warning that increased workload and stress levels are endangering both staff and the publications they produce. In an interim management statement, for the 18 weeks to 3 November 2012, the company blamed the latest multimillion pound cuts package on a 16 per cent slump in advertising revenue. Barry Fitzpatrick, NUJ deputy general secretary, said:

'The major concerns for us are the levels of workload and stress among the staff during this period of change; it is a ticking time bomb. We urge the company to engage actively with the NUJ to address these problems and to build upon the willingness of our members to make the transition work.' The NUJ wants to discuss the impact on all staff of the planned redundancies, including the implications for workplace stress levels. *Source: TUC 'Risks' 18/11/2012*

And more from this sector....

Journalists union says members should report abuse

Following a range of reports of abuse against staff at the BBC, the National Union of Journalists has contacted all NUJ members asking them to report abuse to the NUJ General Secretary and be part of the union's campaign for safer working environments. Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ General Secretary said: "The NUJ is at the forefront of the fight against sexism and sexual harassment in the media industry. We have consistently asked people to come forward, on or off the record, to tell us about their experiences of sexism at work. We wrote to all our women members earlier this year and we have now contacted our members about the inquiries launched at the BBC. We will continue to challenge bullying, harassment and intimidation; we will keep campaigning for safer working environments for journalists. The union will be submitting evidence to the BBC in the same way as we did to Lord Justice Leveson and we want to ensure the voices and experiences of working journalists at the BBC are clearly expressed. Most people find it difficult to come forward and speak openly about bullying and harassment, particularly if they were not properly listened to at the time, or if they felt under pressure not to put on record their complaints. I am asking people to come forward and report their experiences to me in confidence'.

Source: TUC 'Risks' 3rd November 2012

'Well-being' study shows all isn't well.....

Financial issues and psychological distress are commonplace in the UK, an official study has found. The Office for National Statistics' new web-based tool, the 'National Well-being wheel',

confirms that since the recent recession real incomes have fallen as inflation has risen faster than incomes. ONS found around 1 in 8 people were finding it quite or very difficult to manage financially. About 1 in 5 reported some kind of psychological distress. Despite this, people report life satisfaction has remained broadly stable throughout the last decade. National statistician Jill Matheson said: 'These findings emphasise the need to look beyond the 'average' or national picture - it is understanding these differences that will highlight the real areas of need.' There are concerns among unions and safety campaigners that the stoicism about financial and mental health problems found by ONS might also affect occupational health intelligence. They fear workplace sickness and injury reports may decline in a recession as workers, concerned about losing their jobs, are increasingly reluctant to make reports. This week ONS also published mortality figures for England and Wales by cause.

Source: TUC 'Risks' 25/11/12

Bullying and harassment rife in universities

Harassment, friction and bullying are often the hallmarks of working relationships in Britain's universities, union research has confirmed. A survey of 14,000 higher education staff, carried out by the union UCU, found that every one of the 92 UK universities covered had a higher average stress level than that for the British working population as a whole. Using a standard Health and Safety Executive (HSE) questionnaire, the survey asked respondents to rate four statements about their relationships at work. Those responses were translated into a numerical score, ranging from 1 for high stress to 5 for low stress. The average stress level relating to relationships at work for UCU members in universities was a stress-inducing 3.53, compared to a less stressful 4.20 for the British working population. At a third of the institutions represented in the survey, more than 10 per cent of respondents said they were 'always' or 'often' subject to bullying at work. In light of the results, UCU has called on universities to work with it nationally and locally to tackle the causes of stress and bullying. UCU general secretary Sally Hunt said: 'In the past there has been too much focus on individual employees who have suffered from occupational stress and bullying, as though these

problems were the fault of the individual. The focus needs to be on employers taking seriously their responsibility to look after the well-being of their staff.' *Source: TUC 'Risks' 01/12/12*

UNISON survey leads to stress action

A UNISON survey of stress problems experienced by council staff in Glasgow has resulted in the employer agreeing to implement a 'prevention and control' action plan. UNISON City of Glasgow branch used the Health and Safety Executive's stress management standards as the basis for the survey. The initiative was prompted by concerns raised by UNISON members about the effect spending cuts were having on workloads and workplace pressures. Among other findings, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of respondents said they were always, often or sometimes bullied. UNISON branch health and safety officer and Network Steering Group member, Scott Donohoe, said: 'We had a 96 per cent response rate, which was excellent. Unfortunately, a lot of the members' responses were in the red, meaning that work stress was a big issue and that urgent action was required.' He added: 'After presenting our findings to the employer, we agreed that a couple of focus groups, consisting of employees, members and safety reps, would be set up to discuss the results of the survey and identify stressors. As a result of the focus groups, the employer completed a risk assessment and produced a work stress action plan to implement necessary 'prevent and control' measures. Our next step is to review the risk assessment to ensure that the 'prevent and control' measures have been implemented and are still relevant, and widen the work stress campaign to include other employees.' *Source: UNISON news release*

Network information

The Stress Network can provide speakers for TU Branch meetings, workshop and seminar sessions at conferences and for joint employer/employee sessions.

If you would like us to arrange such an event or support your battles against work-related stress, please get in touch with the Convenor.

We are run entirely voluntarily and ask for a donation to our working funds.