RCN poll finds half of nurses unwell due to work pressures

But intimidating workplace environments mean that many staff continue to work and risk burnout. Beena Nadeem reports

NURSES ARE experiencing ‘unprecedented’ levels of stress and patient care is at risk, according to a survey by the RCN.

The survey of 2,000 private and NHS nurses found that half became unwell due to stress in the previous 12 months, but that four out of five continued to work despite not feeling well enough.

The RCN says the findings confirm what has been known anecdotally, that many nurses are silenced from voicing concerns due to cultures of intimidation.

Punitive absence policies are dissuading nurses from raising issues over safety, patient care and their own wellbeing, with one in five nurses in the survey claiming that they have been bullied by managers.

One nurse states: ‘The entire culture of the organisation is shifting, becoming hardline and unforgiving. As pressure builds up on individuals, some respond by exhibiting bullying behaviour to others.’

Commenting on the findings, RCN general secretary Peter Carter says: ‘Rather than an environment that supports staff, some employers are adopting panic behaviours. Staff report being intimidated and blamed, and feel they have no way of speaking out about threats to patient care. Individual nurses are clearly going the extra mile to make sure the job is done. However, the risk of burnout is real and widespread.’

Redundancies

Work by director of the Point of Care Foundation charity Jocelyn Cornwell has found that nurses who are close to burnout frequently depersonalise patients. ‘Because of the pressure of workloads, there’s a lot of anxiety about redundancies, so it is important that the message from senior managers is one of support,’ she says.

Dr Cornwell, also a senior fellow at the King’s Fund, adds that senior managers need to pay attention to how they support line managers to do this better. ‘We see that more in hospices, where there’s good and clear supervision as routine, but not for nurses in the NHS,’ she says.

Nurses should not be made to feel ashamed when needing time off, says RCN nurses in management and leadership forum chair Jane Valle. ‘Managers should be working with human resources to make sure the back-to-work processes have the safety of nurses in mind. If they are off sick, they should be supported when they return, and not feel threatened.’

She says the survey findings have ‘firmed up a lot of evidence around bullying and harassment that the union was hearing anecdotally’.

Ms Valle also urges staff to make use of whistleblowing and, if concerned, to contact the RCN for support.

Director of children and families at community healthcare provider CSH Surrey Sonya Wallbank leads a programme to support professionals to deal with how their work affects them emotionally and psychologically. She agrees that encouraging management to be more involved with staff is wise.

Dr Wallbank’s research suggests that nurses have more stress than troops recently back from combat and she is introducing a programme for restorative clinical supervision of nurses. It involves regular sessions with a supervisor.

‘The key is supporting managers to build empathy and understand their staff’s needs,’ she says.

To read the RCN survey report, Beyond Breaking Point?, go to tinyurl.com/rcn-breakpoint

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