



Staff Consultation on Morale 19th January 2009

Introduction

Reports of low staff morale were brought to the attention of our branch by feedback through our representatives at station level. This prompted urgent workplace meetings on 19th Jan 09 at Weymouth and Poole Ambulance Stations to gauge feeling and bring this to the attention of Trust management.

These meetings were well attended and members brought to us their concerns which are included in this report. The meetings had no set agenda, and took an open structure, where members were left to speak about the issues of their choosing. Members were also asked to complete a questionnaire about their top five hazards at work. The survey is reported below.

This report mainly deals with frustrations from road crews and is for the attention of operations management. A separate consultation is ongoing in control which will be reported to the clinical hub management at a later date.

Main Points

Our members were asked to list the 5 main hazards which concerned them at work. Our survey was completed by 21 members with 1 return being void. The results are as follows:

80% (16 out of 20) reported Overwork and Stress as one of their concerns with **100%** of those listing workload as the reason for this. **50%** listed change and **38%** shift work.

70% reported Violence and Threats as one of their concerns.

55% of members highlighted back strain and manual handling hazards.

40% reported infections and **35%** working alone.

Discussions took place at the meetings which also highlighted areas of anxiety for our membership. The main one being the current meal break arrangements and rota changes.

Rotas

Late last year staff were consulted on changes to working practice in Dorset that will alter the meal break arrangements and move away from paid breaks to unpaid breaks. Since the meetings most stations have designed rotas and submitted them to management for consideration. There was clear confusion from members as to what exactly was expected from the rotas they were asked to design with regards to relief, hours owed and cover.

This exercise has led staff in Dorset to feel anxious as change is an unsettling time for all. The Trust has decided to remove the 2nd paid meal break from the working day which staff from some stations are unhappy about.

During this period of change staff have reported a huge increase in demand and workload which is explored below.

Workload and standbys

This has been reported in national papers and through the Trust's own publications. Members are feeling the strain of this continued activity and it is having an effect on staff morale. Members are being sent to standby points then to jobs and back to standby points which has meant that they are not able to relax and rest between jobs. At the same time members are reporting that their performance is under scrutiny and any delay is looked into. This has come in the form of emails which are cascaded down from the Trust's performance managers. Staff are patient focused and think about the clinical outcome of the patient. This puts strain on the relationship between the staff and the Trust at a time when the Trust needs performance to be maintained. The natural outcome of this is poor morale and a tired workforce. Although it can be argued that there is a direct relationship between good clinical care and response times, many staff feel that the welfare of those on the front line of such care, should be given a higher priority than it currently appears to be given. Some feel that a visible improvement in staff welfare could in turn result in better patient care.

Unison have already highlighted our concerns to the Health & Safety committee with regards to rapid mobilisation of crews due to call connect and the possible hazards this presents.

Another possible adverse side effect to stress is an increase in violence towards staff, from patients, due to staff being tired and demoralised.

Members reported that there used to be a system of “informal counselling” that took place between jobs on station where they discussed feelings about emergencies. This has been limited by unprecedented activity and standbys. This is even more acute for the lone workers such as ECP’s and FRV paramedics and technicians.

Crews at busy stations are often sent out as soon as they arrive for their shift which means the vital VDI and equipment check is not completed before shift. Crews report checking the vehicles during meal breaks as this is the only time they can do this. The same is also reported about the day to day station duties such as drug locker checking. Staff also report difficulty in fulfilling their responsibilities relating to risk reporting and patient referrals for the same reason.

All the while staff are bombarded with PR from the Trust telling them how well they are doing, which whilst probably meant in an encouraging way, is clearly felt by most people to be patronising and demoralising. The majority of those who spoke to us said that they feel trust is moving towards a culture of self-promotion and “propaganda” and away from a logical, concise and supportive method of providing valuable information to staff.

Meal Breaks

This is the most contentious of the issues brought up by our members at the meetings. Our current agreement is one based on a reasonable understanding of the nature of our work and excellent communication, but it has become common practice to use the “exceptional” clause to utilise crews until they exceed the 6 hour mark and then stand them down. Whilst this clause was there to cover incidents such as out entrapments and other extended jobs it has become part of working practice and crews then suffer as they rarely get their 2nd break. This is not the fault of the control staff and Unison wishes to add that our members in control have their own issues with meal breaks. However it is clear that this system remains within the power of the management to resolve.

Communication

The relationship between control and road staff is one that many members, both in control and on the road, are extremely proud of and have sought to maintain. This relationship has been tested over the last 4 months with the demands that control are under to conform to the status plan and ensure road staff get their breaks. This had led to a breakdown in communication and this has a profound effect on staff morale.

Staff have also reported that due to the increasingly rapid mobilisation of crews little or no information is passed to them about the nature of the emergency they are attending. Added to this is the concern that staff will be questioned about their response times and puts crews in a difficult position. Staff do not want to enter potentially dangerous environments without all the information and it is reported that flag files are not routinely passed with jobs.

A report from Weymouth members about a recent major incident highlighted this communication breakdown when a CSO requested food, or release for food, for the crews involved and this was refused by a control manager.

Conclusions

It is clear that our service is under a great deal of pressure. Whilst we top the tables against other Trusts nationally we are now feeling the effect of 4 months of high pressure demand. Added to that is a change in working practice which has left our members and other staff feeling demoralised. As change unsettles people we have seen an increase in complaints about attitude and communication breakdowns. As a union we are being approached by people who have had enough and want to effect change but unsure how to go about it. Any small issue will be blown out of proportion during this time and this creates a difficult situation for Trust management to deal with as they have expected their managers to deal with their workload and provide emergency cover.

Recommendations

1. Inform staff of the current rota state and work closely with staff who design rotas to ensure high level communication about what is expected.
2. Ensure all stations and staff groups (including ECP's) have been consulted with and are fully engaged in the process.
3. Ensure that there is “**staff focus**” as well as performance focus and ensure this is balanced carefully to protect staff.
4. Prioritise carefully between the need for standbys and staff morale. Staff are willing to work hard for the Trust, but are also human, and due to the nature of work need time to debrief and discuss difficult jobs.
5. Ensure that **ALL** relevant information is passed to crews prior to and after dispatch including flag files.
6. Ensure staff have enough time to perform their duties, including statutory duties such as VDI's.
7. Ensure staff get both of their meal breaks and that those breaks are taken at reasonable intervals during their working time.
8. Ensure control staff are applying the meal break policy fairly and reasonably.
9. Ensure a mutual understanding of work pressures between control and road staff by instigating a control and road crew working group.
10. Work in partnership at the LCC to develop a safe system of work and meal break arrangements for staff after April 2009.

11. Assist Unison in following the HSE recommendation of a stress survey to gauge the extent of the issue.

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UNISON