**MEDIA ALERT**

NHS must brace itself for mental health crisis among its workforce

* 2019 figures reveal that mental health-related staff absences are on average costing the NHS £3 billion a year
* Report shows that average NHS worker is taking 7 days off work a year due to poor mental health, with the figures likely to rise further after the coronavirus

The Government has been urged to do everything within its power to support NHS workers, as new research today warns the emotional strain caused by Covid-19 is likely to result in tens of thousands of healthcare staff having to take time off work due to poor mental health.

According to analysis published by WPI Economics before the coronavirus outbreak, the effects of burnout and anxiety were already contributing to the loss of over 10 million working days across the NHS due to poor mental health. This figure equates to approximately 38,500 full-time employees NHS being permanently absent from their workplace, or every worker taking on average 7 sick days every year.

The research, authored by Matthew Oakley, a former Treasury official, states that, “the current crisis can only act to make this worse: through increased workload pressures, even more significant emotional trauma and the constant risk of putting their own lives at risk in order to try to save others, the factors that lead to poor mental health amongst NHS staff have been amplified by Covid-19.”

The report commissioned by VMware, leading innovator in enterprise software, examines the role that digital transformation could play in alleviating the burden on NHS workers, in the context of increased concerns around staff’s mental wellbeing across the service. The paper cites research from 20 pre-existing studies and included 12 interviews with healthcare workers responsible for technology and IT procurement.

It reveals that the potential cost of poor mental health to the NHS could be as high as £3 billion, as hospitals responded to staff absences by paying elevated costs for locums.[[1]](#footnote-1) Previous freedom of information disclosures, for example, have discovered that 16 NHS Trusts have paid more than £3,000 a shift for agency cover since 2017.[[2]](#footnote-2) The report also identifies the process of attracting and training new or temporary staff also contributes significantly to this estimated cost.

Interviews with healthcare staff revealed that NHS employees’ frustration with cumbersome and outdated IT systems – and the resultant reduction in time they could spend with patients – was a significant contributor to their declining mental welfare. A separate survey of NHS healthcare professionals undertaken by The Guardian found that 60 percent believed the NHS’ IT was not fit for purpose, with many complaining of 10-minute log-on times for tasks that needed completing several times a day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock comments, “We all recognise the enormous contribution that NHS workers have made, especially over the past few months. The tireless hard work, compassion and self-sacrifice that those working in our healthcare system have shown during these hard times has been truly remarkable. So, it is critical that we do everything in our power possible to look after those who look after us.

“This interesting research shows just how important good technology is to free up staff time to do more of what people came into healthcare to do: looking after others. That is where technology can play a role. If you work in the NHS, in any part of the service, too often old, out-of-date 20thcentury IT systems get in the way of your ability to do your job. It is simply not acceptable that our dedicated healthcare staff are spending their time logging in to multiple devices during the day, rather than caring for patients.

“We need to ensure every hospital in the country has the tools, confidence and understanding they need to update their IT systems. Every CEO needs to be comfortable and competent in leading digital transformation. Every board needs to know what questions to ask and how to hold their CEO to account. Every medical director and chief nurse needs to know how technology is going to transform what their teams do. By working together, we can relieve the burden on our clinicians and help improve their wellbeing.”

The government and NHS England have committed to providing a core level of digitization in all hospitals by 2024[[4]](#footnote-4). The report provides a series of recommendations that if implemented could enable NHS trusts to meet that pledge. These recommendations include:

* Mandating that all NHS Trusts meet the Government’s goal to have a “digital and tech leader” on its board. Desk research for this report shows that progress against this goal has been slow to date, with only 25% of Trusts in England having met this target[[5]](#footnote-5).
* The government ring fencing part of its increased NHS investment, and bringing together other existing funds focused on investment in digital transformation, to set up a single ‘Smart Care Fund’, to ensure all trusts are able to put in place strong and flexible digital foundations
* Establishing a more transparent method of assessing the digital performance of each NHS Trust, including the development of robust reporting mechanism, to ensure every hospital is encouraged to unlock the potential of digital technologies within healthcare

Matthew Oakley, Director of WPI Economics comments, “If the NHS workforce is to continue to carry out the vital role they are playing both through this pandemic and afterwards, their mental (and indeed physical) health must be at the centre of action to support them.”

1. Figures were compiled by combining statistics from the Stevenson/Farmer review with NHS Digital on the NHS workforce to estimate the total costs of mental ill health to the NHS as an employer: (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers>), 26 October 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A Daily Telegraph investigation using Freedom of Information requests to 49 NHS Hospital Trusts, 11 October 2019: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/11/hospitals-paying-locum-doctors-record-sums-4000-per-shift/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Guardian Healthcare Network Survey interviewed 1,015 healthcare professionals, 20 March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2018/mar/20/nhs-it-health-service-staff-guardian-survey> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NHS Long Term Plan Implementation Framework, June 2019   
   <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/long-term-plan-implementation-framework-v1.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. WPI Economics analysis of publicly available information on Trusts’ Board composition, February 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)