

RCN Response to Affinity Health at Work's Consultation on Project OSCAR-Work Related Stress

Background

Project OSCAR (Occupational Stress Consultation and Research) has just been launched by Affinity Health at Work, Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM), Institute of Employment Studies (IES), and the Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) and is funded by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

The project has **3 main research questions** it seeks to address to inform practice and policy:

- **DEFINE AND LABEL:** How is work-related stress assigned and/or labelled, by individuals, organisations and medical professionals?
- **PREVENT AND MITIGATE:** How is work-related stress prevented or mitigated?
- **IMPLEMENT:** What are the enablers and barriers to organisations effectively preventing WRS risk?

We are now seeking responses from a diverse range of stakeholders (e.g. employers, clinicians, work and health professionals, wellbeing leads, advisory agencies, charities, professional bodies, unions, academics) to complete the call for evidence.

We invite you to:

- Share your best practices
- Provide guidance resources
- Submit relevant evidence on work-related stress

Response from RCN

Work related stress is a significant issue in the nursing workforce and we welcome further action by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to tackle this.

In response to your specific questions

- **DEFINE AND IDENTIFY: How is work-related stress defined and identified by organisations and GPs?**
The RCN supports the HSE's current definition of work-related stress. However, we continue to see examples of health and care organisations describing work related stress as a positive enabler to performance.

The RCN's resources on work related stress for members, reps and managers outlining our approach to work related stress can be found here:

[Managing stress | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](https://www.rcn.org.uk/Managing-stress)

The RCN is also part of the One Voice Alliance and a signatory to [this joint statement](#) which takes a holistic view and highlights many of the factors within the HSE's Management Standards. It also outlines the need for a systematic approach, as too often we see individual level interventions prioritised over a more strategic preventative approach.

As part of the NHS Staff Council, we have also developed joint guidance to support managers and workplace reps work together to tackle work related stress in the NHS [Prevention and management of stress at work | NHS Employers](#)

- **PREVENT AND REDUCE: What interventions are effective for preventing and reducing work-related stress?**

The RCN Foundation, an independent charity whose purpose is to support and strengthen nursing and midwifery, has commissioned two research publications that outline a number of evidence-based recommendations for tackling work-related stress and improving health and wellbeing in the nursing and midwifery workforce.

[The Courage Of Compassion: Supporting Nurses And Midwives To Deliver High-Quality Care | The King's Fund \(kingsfund.org.uk\)](#)

[The_Mental_Health_and_Wellbeing_of_Nurses_and_Midwives_in_the_United_Kin_gdom.pdf \(som.org.uk\)](#)

- **BARRIERS AND ENABLERS: What are the enablers and barriers to organisations effectively reducing the risk of work-related stress?**

In nursing, one of the biggest barriers is lack of nursing staff, not only does this cause moral distress, but it also has knock on impacts including nursing staff not being able to take breaks, long working hours and subsequent fatigue, presentism and burnout.

Our recent report, the State of the Profession, highlights issues with stress and morale within the profession and links to intentions to leave nursing [RCN Employment Survey 2023 | Royal College of Nursing](#)

An earlier RCN report from 2021 also highlights significant levels of violence and harassment against nursing staff, a factor which may lead to work related stress [Employment Survey Report 2021: Workforce diversity and employment experiences | Publications | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](#)

A further report looking at suicide ideation in nursing identified that 69% of members who call the RCN's helpline with suicidal thoughts identified work pressures as an underlying factor. [Understanding the factors underpinning suicidal ideation amongst the UK nursing workforce from 2022 to 2024 | Publications | Royal College of Nursing \(rcn.org.uk\)](#)

We have also analysed sickness absence data in nursing and found high levels of sickness due to stress related illness. Within the [report](#), one of our calls is for more enforcement action in relation to suitable and sufficient risk assessment of work-

related stress. We believe that a targeted inspection campaign in health and social care will focus minds and lead to a more systematic approach, as the recent campaign on work related violence did within the NHS.