

## **NHS policies failing to stop bullying by managers and staff sickness**

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Bullying and discrimination by NHS managers have led to absences among mental health workers, and past policies have failed to stop this, research shows.

Researchers led by the University of Leicester analysed survey data showing that 21% of mental health workers had been bullied and 8% discriminated against by their managers in the previous year. Of these, 86% had gone sick in the year before the survey for an average of 11 days in total.

By contrast 74% of staff who had not been bullied or discriminated against took time off, for an average of eight days over the year. This means that bullying and discrimination is linked to a 37% increase in time off.

Professor Stephen Wood, of the University of Leicester, Dr Karen Niven, Manchester Business School, and Dr Johan Braeken, University of Oslo, report their findings in the journal *Work, employment and society*.

They analysed survey data from 1,472 staff working in 100 wards and 38 outpatient teams in 19 mental health trusts in London, south east England, south Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Bristol, south west England, Warwickshire and the West Midlands.

The researchers note that though all the Trusts had anti-bullying policies, “the findings suggest that NHS policies on abuse and absence at the time of the study were not robust enough to curtail either abuse or absence as a response to this.

“The persistence of abuse when organisations publicise such policies may in fact reinforce any feelings that employees may have that the organisation is to blame for their psychological state, as mistreatment from managers indicates that policies to prevent abuse are not working.”

The researchers say that abuse from managers affected workers’ health directly and also led to a feeling that their work place was unjust and so staff felt they were justified in taking time off.

“People are absent following abuse because they cannot attend work and because they are unwilling to attend. The key finding of this study is that bullying and discrimination from managers results in absenteeism because people’s levels of depression and perceptions of distributive justice are affected.

“Individuals, when sensing that their abuser have violated them, are judging that their abuser both could and should have behaved differently. This generates a feeling that this abuse reflects on the employing organisation. Equally, however, there is an emotional and mental health dimension because the abuse threatens people’s well-being and generates unwanted strain.”

The researchers note that the Francis Report in 2013 into failings in the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust highlighted bullying as part of the problem. Subsequent changes in policies within the NHS reflect the authors' conclusions that the prevention of abuse may need to be tackled by selection processes, training, appraisal and role-modelling.

Bullying includes verbal abuse, withholding information and gossiping about a member of staff. Discrimination could include bias against a staff member based on their religion, ethnicity, age or sexual preference.

*Work, employment and society* is published by the British Sociological Association and SAGE.

[See the article online](#)

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**Notes:**

**1.** Data were taken from the English national survey of staff morale, conducted in 2009 as part of a programme by National Institute of Health Research. A total of 1,472 responses out of 2,258 replies from 3,545 people who received questionnaires were used as part of the research.

**2.** The article is 'Managerial abuse and the process of absence among mental health staff' and appears online in *Work, employment and society*.

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