

Mental health, neurological disorders (MNDs) and psychosocial wellbeing

Mental disorders encompass a broad range of psychiatric and psychological conditions. Neurological disorders are diseases of the central and peripheral nervous system and are caused by many factors. These issues are receiving growing recognition because of the considerable burden they place on healthcare systems, society and employers. Although many MNDs are still not well understood, advances in medical knowledge and therapies mean they are being tackled, and intense research is underway to develop cures, as well as preventative and protective action.

Interaction between MNDs and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

The interaction between MNDs and other NCDs also needs to be understood and assessed. People with undiagnosed or untreated MNDs may not be fully involved with their families, communities and employers. They are at higher risk of engaging in substance abuse and being overweight, which are risk factors for developing NCDs, and have the potential to increase the burden on healthcare systems and employers. Research has also found an association between depressive disorders and the increased prevalence of chronic diseases. Conversely, people with robust mental health can develop buffers against NCDs, mainly through better lifestyle behaviours and reduced stress.

The implications for healthcare businesses

There are considerable cultural differences in the recognition and acceptance of MNDs. These need to be addressed in order to have supportive policies and actions. Providing responsive healthcare systems for MNDs, integrated with primary healthcare, can be viewed as an investment, as early diagnosis and treatment could save the costs of managing complex long-term mental disorders. The pharmaceutical industry has opportunities to work in partnership in multidisciplinary teams to understand the fundamentals of the disorders for the development of innovative and holistic solutions.

Understanding MNDs is important to employers because

- Psychosocial wellbeing is considered key to productive performance contribution to sustainable enterprises, growing employment prospects and economies.
- The workplace is an important source and place of information and education for recognition and access to treatment. In many countries, the employer may be the only, or the best, accessible source of healthcare information, or the financial provider for access to the services.
- Early intervention can prevent mental deterioration and any associated physical deterioration, as well as limiting the effect on colleagues and the rest of the work team.
- Health information provided to workers can permeate to the family and community.
- Some businesses offer solutions to prevention or alleviation of mental disorders e.g. the food industry, sports facilities, pharmaceutical and healthcare providers. They have business opportunities from issues surrounding mental and associated physical health and wellbeing.
- Other businesses not directly identified with mental and physical disorders need to consider the secondary business threats and opportunities from policies and actions.

Work and lifestyle

The causes of MNDs are multifactorial and it is difficult to separate genetic, lifestyle, environmental and work-related factors. Currently there is not a great understanding of work-related mental and neurological ill health, beyond the discussions about work-related stress and psychosocial wellbeing. Developments in technology, monitoring techniques, understanding of science and cultural acceptance will shift knowledge, perceptions and responsibilities. It is important for businesses to differentiate between ill health due to work-related mental and neurological disorders, for which they have legal responsibilities for prevention and often rehabilitation and compensation, from those conditions involving genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors, for which employers do not have legal responsibility, or the ability to control. Employers need to take a business decision about the appropriateness of intervention and management. The legal obligations for employers to have responsibilities for psychosocial well-being are shifting and are dependent on their recognition and the practicalities of management.

Employment can make positive contributions to mental health and well-being

From a societal perspective there is much evidence that

- Work, in general, is good for health and wellbeing.
- Long term absence from work, work disability and unemployment generally have a negative impact on health and wellbeing.

Apart from the significant financial pressures and effects on families and relationships, research has shown that absence from the workforce for an extended period can lead to an increase in mental health difficulties, as well as physical health issues. Being out of the workforce has been shown to play a significant part in establishing long-term patterns of unhealthy behaviour, such as lack of exercise and increased drinking and smoking. The positive contribution employment makes to mental health and wellbeing, and hence the economy, cannot be underestimated.

Mental health, neurological disorders - a developing policy issue

Forecasts indicate that the burden of MNDs will increase in the years ahead, particularly in the developed world, where the relative ageing of the population adds to the need for older workers to remain in employment, and because they will be more affected by age-related MNDs. The cost of this burden will be in lost resources and a considerable burden to healthcare systems, society and economies. Scientific developments are revealing more about the causes and potential for successful interventions.

What the IOE does to influence developments

The IOE promotes and defends the interests of business and employers in international forums, and works to ensure enterprise development and job creation. IOE work on occupational and public health issues focuses on employment and social conditions for sustainable enterprises. Business must be involved in the policy discussions to ensure that healthcare messages and developments align with business imperatives.

For more Information and Answers to your Questions

IOE members will be kept informed of the policy developments in the debate on mental health. For additional information on this topic, please also visit the Occupational Safety and Health section of our website www.ioe-emp.org. If you do not find what you are looking for, please e-mail IOE Adviser, Pierre Vincensini, at vincensini@ioe-emp.com or call: +41 22 929 00 15.