

The bigger picture



Men are 56% more likely than women to get cancer and 67% are more likely to die from it."



Why is male health so poor in some industries and what can be done about it? Jim Pollard asks.

Though the recent news that deaths at work are continuing on their downward trend is encouraging, those members who take a broader view of risk and safety management will know the news is less good the more males you have in your workforce. Men are 50% more likely to die before the age of 65 than women, with one in five dying before they reach this age. In other words, about 20% of your male workforce will probably die before retirement. The impact of this on workers' families, friends and work colleagues is obvious – with a significant knock-on effect on your organisation's bottom line.

And it's worse in the UK than elsewhere. True, life expectancy has increased in

Britain, but compared to other European countries the gap has widened in terms of years of premature life lost and life expectancy.

The bigger picture

The TUC believes workers in the UK work the longest hours in Europe, take the shortest lunch breaks and enjoy the fewest public holidays. Certainly, in 2014, Great Britain was 24th in the OECD average hours per week per worker table. True, the UK was behind the US but the only western European neighbours with longer working weeks were those devastated by the financial crisis: Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain. Clearly, it's impossible for businesses to ignore



this wider picture but it may be asking too much of even the most committed risk and safety management professional to rebuild the global economy.

So in health terms, what is going on? This article will look at the big killers of the men in your workforce. It matters because there are now more than a million active workers aged over 65 in the UK and, with an ageing workforce, general health considerations are growing in importance.

The real silent killer

Coronary heart disease is the biggest single cause of death in the UK. The heart needs five basic fuels to keep it ticking: fresh air, a balanced diet, a healthy weight, regular exercise and a relaxed 'don't take yourself too seriously' attitude to life. How much does your workplace help your workers in this regard and how much does it hinder?

Ensure your workforce is aware of the screening available. Everyone over 40 should be invited for an NHS Health Check. It's easy, quick and painless and will give individuals a very good idea of their heart attack risk and some personalised tips to reduce it. Men over 65 should also be invited to abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA) screening. There are very few symptoms before the aorta bursts so screening is vital. Men are six times more likely to have an AAA than women.

Underlying problems

So how do men know if they have heart problems? Isn't high blood pressure called the silent killer? It is, but there is one early warning mechanism that men are very likely to be aware of. Everything that is good for the heart in terms of promoting circulation is good for the penis – so regular erection problems, known as erectile dysfunction (ED) could be an early sign of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes or other problems. Workers should not ignore ED or put it down to age (age doesn't

make much difference) but see their GP. It's a win-win situation for men, and should be presented as such, as they'll get both the ED and the underlying problem addressed, improving both the length and the quality of their life.

The second big killer of men (and indeed women) is cancer. At least a third of us will get cancer in our lives. Analysis by the Men's Health Forum suggests men are 56% more likely than women to get cancer and 67% more likely to die from it. Cancer Research UK suggest that an unhealthy lifestyle is behind about a third of cancers. So it's important to challenge fatalistic assumptions about it 'all being in the genes' or down to 'bad luck'. The most common cancers in men are prostate, lung and bowel in that order. Between them they account for more than half of all cancers in men.



Liver disease is the only major cause of death that is still increasing – men are twice as likely to die from it as women.”

Raise awareness

Given that it is so much part of our world, most people are very poorly informed about the symptoms of cancer so raising awareness of these, obvious though they may seem, will not be wasted. The NHS is currently running a Be Clear on Cancer campaign which highlights the most common symptoms. In a Men's Health Forum survey, only 61% of men said they would go to see their GP if they had blood in a stool, only 54% if they were coughing up blood and only 28% if they had a persistent cough. But the first is the most common symptom of bowel

cancer, the other two of lung cancer. Other common cancer symptoms include any unexplained bleeding, unexplained weight-loss, unexplained pain, a lump or swelling, getting out of breath more easily, blood in your urine, changes in moles, feeling bloated or experiencing heartburn for three weeks or more. There is some evidence that men are worried about wasting a GP's time so giving them permission to see their doctor about these symptoms is very important.

Most people know that the single best thing you can do to reduce your cancer risk is to not smoke. So encouraging quitting remains important. (The UK is among the top 20 countries worldwide for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) deaths. In Europe, only Denmark and Hungary have higher COPD death rates.) But the second best thing is something that workplaces can truly help with. That is to keep your workforce active.

It isn't an exact science but research on the causes of death suggests that being inactive is responsible for twice as many deaths as being overweight. As you'll be aware, the NHS recommends two and a half hours of moderately aerobic activity a week. That's exercise that leaves you a little breathless like brisk walking, cycling or a bit of sport. But, and this is an important point, anything is better than nothing. What does your workplace offer? You have a particular responsibility to men working long hours.

Activity is key

Men tend to be more attracted to weight-loss programmes that include an activity element as well as a diet component anyway. But promoting exercise for its wider health benefits should be considered too. It's not just about providing facilities or classes or even cheap gym membership, it's about creating a culture in which it is OK to use them. Just going for a walk at lunchtime

is considered unacceptable in some workplaces. Senior staff who take breaks, take lunch and take exercise can have a massive impact in creating this culture.

Liver disease is the only major cause of death still increasing year on year in the UK, with twice as many people dying of it today as in 1991. Men are twice as likely to die as women. There are three main causes: obesity, viral infections such as hepatitis and, most of all, alcohol. The maximum safe level for male drinking was reduced from 21 units a week to 14 in January 2016. This reflects the real concern about the damage drink can do. Why not join in with initiatives that help reduce drinking? These can be fun challenges between departments or teams. Dry January has been joined this year by the dryathlon (Cancer Research UK's alcohol-free initiative for September).

Between the ears

Last but definitely not least, don't ignore mental health. Indeed, arguably good mental health comes first – before physical health – because if you're feeling fine between your ears, you're far more likely to look after yourself properly and seek help when you need it. What employer wouldn't want a workforce of well-balanced, mentally healthy individuals?

Unchecked mental health problems can lead to self-harm and suicide. Three quarters of all suicides are by men and it is the main cause of death in men under 35. At work, poor mental health can lead to poor concentration, more accidents and lower output.

There's a lot of nonsense talked about pressure and stress, especially in the workplace. A lot of folk – and senior managers are frequently guilty of this – pretend it doesn't affect them. They wear extreme hours, excessive workload and the impossibly long list of people 'reporting' to them as a badge of courage. 'It's all water

off a duck's back', 'what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger'; add whatever cliché you prefer.

The truth is that if you don't process stress, it will build up and burn you out. So the question for all employees across the organisation is: are you processing stress in a healthy way? If the way you process stress is to pass it on down the line to colleagues, bullying those you work with, dumping absurd requirements on them or simply becoming impossible, this is not healthy – not for you, not for the business. If you process stress by self-medicating on drink or drugs or in some other addictive behaviour (sex or gambling, for example) then as a solution to stress, that won't last long either. We all need to find ways of processing stress that are healthy for us and healthy for those around us.

Mental wellbeing is not about avoiding stress. That would be impossible and a little stress is good for you, anyway. It's about knowing how to deal with it. Taking exercise, going for a walk, doing puzzles, sports, games, getting outdoors, dancing, singing, laughing, a good night's sleep, a hobby, meeting friends, learning something or doing a course, volunteering – they're all part of the 'wheel of wellbeing' which brings together much of what we know about good mental health into a colloquial and accessible concept. The wheel has six components: be active, keep learning, give, connect (with others), take notice (of what's around you) and care.

Figure it out

That's all very well, but how can risk and safety management professionals help with this?

Here are five suggestions:

1. Offer something outside work. The workplace can do a lot to promote the activities above. Whatever you do, try to do something: simply offering

extra-curricular activities makes a clear statement to colleagues of the importance you attach to a good work-life balance.

2. Encourage workers to organise together. This could be informally around a sports team or more formally through a trade union. Connecting with others is proven to promote mental wellbeing in all involved.
3. Give your workforce someone genuinely independent to talk to. Talking is the route to good mental wellbeing and one of the easiest, most effective ways – for the individual and for your business – of seeing off little problems before they become big ones.
4. Demonstrate good practice from the top. It's much easier to encourage the wider workforce in healthier behaviours if senior management gives a lead.
5. Talk about mental health in a way that does not make it feel like an individual failing or loss of control. That's why stress is a useful concept – it implies something external to the individual. Use words that put the individual back in control.

The key mental health message should be: we can't change what happens to us but we can change how we react to it. (That is actually a model for a resilient business as well as a resilient individual.) Someone else might annoy or upset you but you choose how you react. Don't fixate on whose fault it is, just focus on how you react. Do you get angry? Do you get sad? Walk away and figure it out rather than reacting first and asking questions later. This strategy would be very helpful in most workplaces!

With thanks to Jim Pollard, editor of the Men's Health Forum website (www.menshealthforum.org.uk) for contributing this article.