



Supporting occupational health
and wellbeing professionals

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16 July 2020, London

Challenging work conditions lead to widespread mental health problems and burnout among nurses and midwives, new report finds

- **Nurses and midwives are at greater risk of stress, burnout, and mental health problems than those in most other jobs**
- **Workplace factors (e.g. high workload, bullying, lack of support, and emotional demands) are the main sources of poor wellbeing**
- **The SOM calls for a summit to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of nurses and midwives, especially for BAME staff**

Current working conditions experienced by nurses and midwives pose a significant threat to their mental health, finds a new report from The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM), commissioned, and funded by the RCN Foundation. The report, *“The Mental Health and Wellbeing of Nurses and Midwives in the United Kingdom”* identifies the high risk of mental health problems and burnout in the professions. It also finds that working conditions not only threaten the health of nurses and midwives, but also impact on their ability to deliver high quality care to patients.

The report, authored by Professor Gail Kinman and Dr Kevin Teoh from Birkbeck University of London and Professor Anne Harriss, President of the SOM, and an experienced nurse, reviewed and analysed the research evidence on the mental health of nurses and midwives in the UK.

Professor Harriss said: *“The report clearly highlights the lack of knowledge and training of managers to deal with the high level of stress experienced by nurses and midwives. For example, many ward managers receive minimal, if any, training regarding the impact of shift work on the health of staff. This knowledge is essential when planning staffing rotas to mitigate any possible negative impact on health.”*

Professor Kinman said: *“Action is urgently needed to improve the mental health and wellbeing of UK nurses and midwives and the COVID-19 pandemic has raised additional concerns. The additional demands placed on staff by the pandemic means their wellbeing is likely to deteriorate further if the findings of our report are not acted upon. Our report has highlighted the need for evidence-informed, systemic interventions to tackle the causes of work-related stress in the sector and we have identified some initiatives that might be particularly effective.”*

Deepa Korea, RCN Foundation Director says: *“The challenges faced by the nursing and midwifery profession in the current climate means that the mental health and wellbeing of nurses and midwives has never been more important. The Foundation will continue to focus on this critical issue to ensure it receives the attention it deserves.”*

Dr Teoh said: *“Our report highlights the excessive demands experienced by nurses and midwives in the UK and how this affects their mental health. It also identifies areas where our knowledge is very limited, such as the experiences of ethnic minority nurses and midwives and how their needs can be best addressed.”*

Action is needed to address the organisational causes of poor mental health and wellbeing in nurses and midwives (e.g. high work demands, poor leadership, lack of resourcing and workplace bullying). The authors found that many staff are reluctant to disclose mental health difficulties and



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avoid asking their managers for support. Where support is available, information is often poorly disseminated. To avert a mental health crisis among staff, more healthy working environments are needed for nurses and midwives, the stigma of disclosing mental health problems should be reduced, and managers and leaders need training to identify and alleviate stress in staff.

The report also recommends that phased approaches to return to work should be available to nurses and midwives who are struggling with their mental wellbeing. They should be able to self-refer to services, or for occupational health support, rather than go through their managers. It is particularly important for them to be given the time to access support systems and to participate in interventions and training.

Finally, nurses and midwives should also be required to take their full entitlement to breaks and always have access to appropriate food and drink and bathroom facilities.

Recommendations from the SOM Report include:

- Action is needed to reduce the stigma of disclosing stress and help-seeking
- Appropriate flexible working options are needed to improve work-life balance and encourage return to work after sickness absence
- More emphasis is needed on creating healthier working environments for nurses and midwives and the risks around the occurrence of stress
- Greater awareness is needed of how increased bureaucracy and administration can increase work demands for nurses and midwives and impact on their wellbeing and patient safety
- Optimum staffing levels should be guaranteed and the risks to the health of staff and the safety of patients of short staffing recognised
- Regular risk assessments of psychosocial hazards experienced by nurses and midwives are needed, using best practice frameworks
- All organisations should have a clear and accessible policy on mental health at work that is put into action
- Organisations need to have effective policies on dealing with abusive and bullying behaviours in the workplace and must be willing to act on complaints
- People's understanding of the role of occupational health professionals should be enhanced to raise awareness of how they can help. Barriers to access should be identified and removed
- Occupational health services need to have the appropriate resources, knowledge, and tools to meet the needs of staff and staffing levels should be sufficient to meet the increasing demand.

The report was commissioned and funded by the RCN Foundation and written before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The report's authors say that there is now evidence that the pandemic has highlighted further mental health concerns for nurses and midwives, related to lack of safety equipment, health risks posed to themselves and their families, and the death of colleagues. SOM is calling for a summit to understand the true impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of nurses and midwives, which groups are at higher risk, and what can be done to alleviate the problems and support individuals.

#ends#

Notes for editors

- **Report production process** - The report involved a systematic review by Professor Gail Kinman and Dr Kevin Teoh. The findings were reviewed by a steering group and a series of recommendations were drafted. An advisory group reviewed the list of recommendations from



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the systematic review. The steering and advisory groups comprised nurses and midwives, occupational health specialists and other relevant professionals, such as healthcare educators. The groups represented different nursing specialities and demographic profiles, including ethnic backgrounds and location.

- **About The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM)** - a multi-disciplinary professional society whose membership includes over 1,700 OH doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and technicians. SOM Patrons are Lord Blunkett, Dame Carol Black, and Sir Norman Lamb.
- **About the RCN Foundation** - it is committed to supporting and strengthening nursing. As an independent charity, they provide grants for nursing-led research and projects, as well as education and hardship, support professionals to innovate, develop their careers and get through tough times. They champion the nursing team and its achievements, celebrating the difference it makes to peoples' lives.
- **About occupational health:** Occupational health (OH) helps people of working age access and stay in appropriate work and live full and healthy working lives despite underlying disabilities or health conditions. Occupational clinicians help employers reduce sickness absence and increase productivity by providing advice on best practice. They advise on fitness for work, return to work programmes, workplace adjustments to enable people with health conditions to return to/remain at work, suitable alternative work, and early retirement on ill health grounds. The need for robust and increasing OH services in many sectors has been highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis. The need for advice from OH doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists, hygienists, ergonomists etc. on all aspect of business policy, the adequacy of control and how to protect our workers continuing to face the public has never been greater.
- **Front line support** is provided at <https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/toolkit/ourfrontline-health/> and the RCN has a [toolkit](#) on healthy workplaces.

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