

Relief for tired, stressed staff

The two hottest issues in North American pharmacy as we enter 2001 are the pharmacist shortage and reducing dispensary errors.

One of the factors that influence both is the psychological well being of our staff and our patients. Stress and fatigue result in enormous losses of time and elevated risks of errors.

In order to recognize stress in your employees, it's important to understand the conditions that may become stressors in your pharmacy environment. They include:

- **Control.** The more your employees can determine their own work routine, the better. The opposite—lack of control—leads to emotional and physiological stress.

- **Support.** Do the staff, including supervisors, work as a team? If they do, you'll see a reduction in the adverse effects of other stressors.

- **Workload.** What's important here is not the actual, but the perceived workload. Job dissatisfaction will result whenever a staff member perceives their workload to be too heavy.

- **Demands (on task and performance),** such as a mandate to fill a certain number of prescriptions per hour, or pressure to ensure wait times are kept below a certain standard. Both can be implemented, but not without providing staff with the necessary support structures.

- **Physical environment.** Noise, poor lighting, unpleasant indoor climate and small, crowded dispensaries can all cause stress.

- **Complexity,** or the number of different demands involved in the job. Are you asking your pharmacists to answer all phone calls, ring up sales, handle refunds on returned items, dust the shelves, take out the trash, order pharmaceuticals, fill prescriptions, look for drug reaction problems and counsel all customers? A daunting task, which makes it difficult to discern priorities.

- **Responsibility for the lives and well being of other people.** No one goes through their entire career without making mistakes and in pharmacy, those mistakes can have enormous consequences for your patients and their families.

Stress is the result of a mismatch between the demands placed on a person and their individual capacity to handle those demands. It is a subjective state of mind that is not necessarily all bad. Having some stress in your life improves your capabilities to meet the demands placed on you and staves off boredom and dissatisfaction. Too little stress can therefore be as harmful and dangerous as too much, and it's important to realize that too much stress will not necessarily lead to errors. Indeed, recent research has confirmed that errors can and do occur when pharmacists are less busy as well as in both low-

and high-volume dispensaries.

One way to help staff recognize when they are stressed (and perhaps more prone to errors) is to have them 'self-monitor.' Ask staff members to carry small books in which they should note any and all "slips" (where they make an error and then realize and correct it) along with their state of mind or mood at the time the slip occurred. A study by Grasha reported that by recognizing how these slips occur, the number of self-corrections was reduced by 68%.

The pharmacist shortage is another stressor on pharmacy and pharmacists. Everyone is looking for ways to find new pharmacists to help fill the ever-increasing number of prescriptions—but many are ignoring the fact that in today's environment, 30% of a pharmacist's time can be delegated and 30% can be automated.

It's time to recognize that automation can significantly reduce fatigue and stress. Automation evens out the workload while eliminating routine and tedious tasks. These benefits will not show up in a strict financial model of "automation cost vs. labour savings" but their importance is crucial to the future of pharmacy.

Another way to reduce workload-induced stress and fatigue is through task-switching. Clearly define the job routines for pharmacists and technicians, and allow each person to vary their routine (as much as possible) every couple of hours. This will alleviate a psychological process whereby personnel fall into "auto-pilot." It also adds an extra set of eyes to prescriptions dispensed.

Frequent, short breaks can also have an enormous impact on error reduction and job satisfaction. These rest breaks need not be extended—a number of three- to five-minute breaks have been shown to have greater recuperative value than a few long ones.

People don't need a break "from work" so much as a break from "the work I've been doing for hours." Doing a shorter, routine task that allows you to relax from your main duties will result in increased and improved output, and has been proven to reduce fatigue and improve concentration.

While we cannot eliminate all stress and fatigue, we can recognize the symptoms and work on ways to provide relief. The result will be improved performance, reduced errors, satisfied employees, happier patients and clients, and a more profitable business. ❁

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