

Healthy staff, healthy residents

Demanding hours caring for residents can take a toll on the wellbeing of staff but there are ways employers can help ensure a healthy workforce, TARA DIVERSI explains.



While it's not scientific research by any nature, it is interesting that through our dietetic clinic, nurses and carers proportionally make up a higher number of clients than any other professions.

This could mean a number of things, including the idea nurses and carers are interested in improving their health more than other professions; or that they are more aware of the expertise of an accredited practising dietitian and see us rather than partaking in fad diets.

Although these could be underlying positives, a commonly held view is that people in these professions are busy, work shift-hours and when they do have time, they are too busy looking after others' needs to pay any attention to their own.

The unfortunate fact of the matter is if staff don't look after their health, it is only a matter of time before they are unable to look after anyone else's. So as an employer, what are some things that you can do to promote health in the workplace?

The first thing to look at is ensuring you are encouraging breaks. What we know is that if we are not eating at least three times per day it is more difficult to lose or maintain weight, we become more easily fatigued and irritable, we are more likely to eat unhealthy 'junk' food, and can overeat when we need the food the least – just after a shift before bed.

Although it is difficult to schedule breaks when understaffed or on very busy shifts, the first major issue for the nutritional health of your employees is ensuring that breaks are prioritised as much as the work to be done. Often this is 'policy' however there is a huge difference between workplaces that 'allow'

breaks to those that 'encourage' breaks.

With regular breaks, meals and planned snacks can be consumed at this time, rather than staff munching into chocolate and biscuits in response to feeling tired or hungry because they haven't had time or were not encouraged to have a break. It may seem hard when things need to be done, but something we do know is that with better nutrition during a shift, employees are more productive when they get back from their break and are less likely to make mistakes.

Secondly, allowing healthy snacks such as fruit, nuts or wholegrain crackers rather than junk food at nursing areas is one strategy that can be a backup for those who do not get a break.

Providing meals from the catering department at a small fee may assist in ensuring your staff are well nourished.

Food provided could include cold meals – such as cereal and milk or sandwiches including some form of protein (tuna, egg, lean ham or chicken); and salad, which can be pre-made and kept in staff room fridges with an honesty box. Hot meals could be made available also if your catering staffing is adequate for this.

A fruit bowl in staff rooms is also a great reminder to eat some fresh food and a positive visual of a health workplace to staff and visitors.

In vehicles, as much as we need to ensure that we get the right fuel in our system, lubricant is just as important. For the human machine, this means it is really important to drink enough water. With more technology in the hospital and aged care sectors making the workplace more mobile and efficient, it can have a negative effect on the fluid consumption of staff, as there is not a common place where they spend enough regular time to leave a water



A bowl of fresh fruit for staff encourages healthy snacking.

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ward or your facility, have them come in and do a wellness session with your staff.

One thing our team of dietitians love is that following our health promotion interventions, the nutritional status of our patients improves. It seems that when

they understand the importance of nutrition for themselves, their families and have some of their questions answered, the staff apply this knowledge to the patients and residents they are caring for.

We also find it improves the relationships between nursing staff and dietitians, which means they are more confident to refer patients who may benefit or contact the dietitian with a quick question. We feel that before staff are ready to learn about nutrition requirements of the patients, they need to have a good understanding of good nutrition for themselves and their family.

Along with wellness seminars, other health promotion strategies can include: holding wellness expos, health audits and assessments (which we recommend prior to your health promotion strategies to assess your individual needs), subscribing or developing a healthy promotion newsletter available for your staff to read and placing health promotion posters in staff common areas.

However, as you most likely know, there is no point in having a band aid approach without encouraging healthy behaviour. None of these strategies will positively promote a healthy workplace without strong support from staff and management.

bottle. And, when busy, many nurses or carers get to the end of the shift and realise they have not had any fluid – no wonder they are more tired, irritable and have headaches.

Some strategies to improve these include having water coolers with cups placed at regular intervals throughout the wards or facilities in staff common areas and allowing staff to have water bottles with them.

In addition to promoting healthy living, it is important to know that shift workers have specific dietary needs to ensure maximum health. If you have a dietitian servicing your



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