30th October 2015

Mr Simon Stevens
Chief Executive
NHS England

Dear Mr Stevens

The NHS Health at Work Network welcomes the NHS Staff Wellbeing initiative you announced last month and our Members look forward to being key players in its implementation.

We agree that the only way the NHS can deliver high quality health care, whilst trying to meet the unprecedented demands on the Service, is to invest in its own staff. Studies in this area, highlighted in Dr Steve Boorman’s report for the NHS in 2009 have clearly demonstrated that targeted investment in occupational health and wellbeing contributes significantly to keeping staff fit, healthy and productive.

Your recent announcement focused on staff wellbeing, the need to improve the health of NHS staff, and particularly upon your concern for occupational health provision for GPs suffering from burnout and stress. NHS occupational health services (OH) are well placed to deliver the range of core specialist support to NHS staff including GPs. OH has a key role in the productivity of the NHS by keeping staff at work, or supporting them to return to work more quickly.

The other longstanding and core work of OH services, particularly OH nurses in the prevention of work-related ill health and accidents in NHS staff, is also critical. This includes targeted health screening and immunisation programmes that contribute to patient safety, alongside the investigation, assessment and, where appropriate, management of work related ill health.

Members of our Network have been performing these key roles skillfully for many years, playing a vital part in helping the NHS to meet growing demand. It is important that the move to ‘wellbeing’ initiatives enhances and complements existing evidence-based specialist OH activities.

The main barrier to wellbeing programmes is identifying the required resources and ensuring that these don’t become victim to future cost improvement. Equally, evaluation of all the initiatives, including the planned health checks for staff, is the most difficult but important component of such programmes. This will ensure sustainability and encourage wider take-up across the rest of the NHS.

The Network remains concerned about the plans for the new OH arrangements for staff working in primary care. It is important that the new specification provides properly funded occupational health access for all staff working in that sector. Many OH consultant doctors with particular expertise in the Health of Healthcare Professionals are already providing specialist support for doctors, including to GPs suffering from stress and burnout. This should continue as part of the new nationally specified service for GPs.
The NHS Staff Wellbeing initiative has potential to improve the health of all NHS staff. Indeed many of our Members have been playing an active part in local NHS wellbeing initiatives for many years, and the Network offers its support in helping to shape and share future good practice. We hope that wellbeing will be positioned as part of a broader occupational health and wellbeing strategy, building upon existing achievements, in which our Members have played a significant role.

Yours sincerely

Dr Anne de Bono
Chair, NHS Health at Work Network

*The NHS Health at Work Network represents the NHS occupational health teams in England*