

Title: HOW THE EUROPEAN UNION IS “WORKING ON STRESS”

Subject: Nursing

Type of Paper: Essay

Words: 369

Work-related stress affects almost a third of the entire working population in the European Union. It is now the second biggest occupational health problem after back pain, affecting nearly one in three employees in the EU and contributing to over half of all staff absenteeism.

Stress is a major cause of concern, not only because of the toll it takes in terms of human misery, but also because of the economic impact on businesses and the social costs to European countries. Already, in 1993, the European Commission sounded the alarm in its “call for action” conference, which has been followed by a number of initiatives in this area.

This paper provides the background to developments in the European Union on work-related stress and psychosocial risk. It examines current research and findings. It provides examples of the detrimental effects of work-related stress and shows that approaches at Member State level are not homogeneous. In addition, the paper examines the major activities that have taken place at EU level and, in particular, highlights two important initiatives. The first is a description of the work of the Bilbao-based European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, which provides publications and information on risk assessment, case studies, prevention, training, treatment and policy on work-related stress and psychosocial risk. The Agency also dedicated its 2002 European Week campaign to the topic of stress at work. This is the biggest decentralised occupational health and safety campaign to occur each year in the European Union and beyond. The second initiative deserving of special mention is the recently launched formal consultation of the European Social Partners by the European Commission, a procedure enshrined in the EC Treaty. This enables the Social Partners to give their opinions on the advisability of a European-wide initiative, what type of initiatives might be appropriate and how best to assess the need for a voluntary or binding approach. Work-related stress can be prevented – this is the leitmotiv for the work of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and the European Commission. The paper concludes with an assessment of future prospects and how activities at European level might alleviate the very costly and very damaging consequences of stress at work.

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