

Identifying and alleviating excessive workload

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orkload and resulting stress is a chronic problem in HSA workplaces, both in health care and in the social services sector. HSA members know first hand that BC is experiencing a shortage of skilled, highly-trained health care and social services staff.

And BC is not alone. In 2005, health science professionals working in Ontario hospitals ranked stress and workload as the top issues in a health and safety survey conducted by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. These results are consistent with the conclusions of several recent national reports, including the Romanow report, the Kirby report and the Health Council of Canada report.

All documented a connection between shortages and poor working conditions confronting health science professionals.

Similarly, working overtime is an increasing trend, along with workers who skip work breaks in an attempt to keep up with ever-increasing workload. Poor workafter ing conditions lead to profound morale problems that affect not only todays care providers but also discourage young people from entering these disciplines.

Tracking excessive workload is the first step in clearly identifying and analyzing a problem. HSAs Workload Investigation Tool is an analytical guide to identifying key problem areas, and has become a valuable aide with which members can work towards a solution.

For example, do you often feel you have to work through meal breaks? Are you able to take your annual allotment of vacation, or have you experienced cancellations due to workload? How long is your department waitlist for patients and clients? Do you often work unpaid overtime?

Many HSA members feel pressured to "finish up" after hours. But this adds up quickly. If you work a four-day workweek, thirty minutes of unpaid overtime every day adds up to a full day of unpaid work every month, or roughly twelve days of work a year: three full workweeks on your four-day schedule!

There is not quick fix to many workload problems, but some can be solved or alleviated with the aid of the union. As a first step, your HSA steward can advise you and your co-workers on how to discuss your issues with your supervisor, and advocate on your behalf if grievance procedures are required.

Pursuing resolution to unacceptable or dangerous workloads is a rigorous process. Nothing will change unless workers analyze all of the factors contributing to unsafe workloads, and work together to take daily action ... supporting each other to work at a safe, reasonable pace.

This includes an end to "free" or unpaid overtime. Charging for overtime helps to document workload. This

data can help managers advocate for more resources, or consider alternative delivery of service models to make working conditions reasonable. Unless HSA members are constantly vigilant, and are aware of their rights under their collective agreements, the situation will only worsen. 

Copies of the Workload Investigation Tool ... customized to your work type ... are available from your steward. If you have further questions or concerns, contact your steward or HSAs Occupational Health and Safety Officer.

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