



## From Our Irregular Correspondent

### **Dealing with very difficult colleagues – The hidden menace in the workplace –**

One in a series of occasional papers on health and social care topics by Terry & Monica Dennis of Healthcare Alliances. Our aim is to be thought provoking with a touch of devil advocacy. They are based mainly on our experiences of work, mentoring and training. They contain the occasional reference.

#### **The scale of the stress problem**

Many staff working in the NHS suffer from long term stress and sickness rates are high. According to the NHS Staff Survey (March 2009), 12% of NHS staff say that they have been bullied or harassed at work, most often by their manager. The Interim NHS Health and Wellbeing Report for the Department of Health (Boorman Review, August 2009) states that, at an average of 10.7 days a year per employee, NHS sickness rates are nearly 50% higher than those in the private sector. It also states that two of the three most common reasons for absence are stress and mental health problems.

Other statistics include:

- 33% per cent of staff had felt unwell because of work-related stress over the past 12 months (Healthcare Commission 2006 Staff Survey)
- Nearly 40% of NHS staff in Wales suffer from work-related stress (Welsh Assembly Government 2005)

#### **Impact on patient care**

High levels of stress related sickness endanger patient care. According to a report in the BMJ (June 2009) 75% of hospital consultants surveyed have had concerns about patient safety, professional misconduct or bullying at some point in their career. Higher levels of staff health and wellbeing are associated with lower agency costs, lower absence rates, lower levels of MRSA and lower standardised mortality rates.

## **The root cause**

Views on the root cause of the problem vary.

Politicians, commentators and staff all call for better management in the NHS. The Health and Wellbeing Report recommends that NHS staff should be taught how to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Others say that the NHS should be setting standards for diet, exercise and smoking (HSJ August 2009). Fingers are also pointed at lax management practices, low staffing levels, high workloads, patient demands and staff being told not to come in if they are ill so as to protect patients and other staff members.

There is no doubt that all of these play a part, but people we mentor and delegates on our training courses point to something else. Something that staff have been telling us again and again. Something that has made us think that the politicians, analysts, and many of the commentators are missing the point. It appears there is a hidden menace in the workplace. Wherever this menace is found then sickness and stress levels soar.

## **Pinpointing the real cause – personality disorders**

Our core business is running development, learning and training courses for staff who work in the care sectors (health, social and voluntary care).

Amongst other courses, we run modules on:

- Teamworking
- Conflict
- Interpersonal communication
- Dignity and respect

All of the modules are designed to cover generic sets of skills that are applicable across all work situations. However, we have found that participants are increasingly raising problems that they have which stem from one particular work colleague.

Whilst their specific stories vary, the situation they describe always fall into one or more of the following categories:

- Bullying
- Harassment
- Conflict
- Insults
- Exclusion
- Intimidation
- Aggression

As a result, we started to include a short section on personality disorders in some of our modules. We were shocked by what we found! We would show participants the following list of personality disorder subtypes (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition, American Psychiatric Association):

- Paranoid            Highly suspicious, distrusting and cold
- Borderline        Moody, angry, stormy relationships
- Anti-social       Little sense of morals - 'Get what you want'
- Narcissistic       Self-centred, grandiose
- Schizoid           No desire for closeness
- Histrionic        Dramatic, shallow, over emotional, centre of attention
- Obsessive        Over-conscientious, picky, obsessed with details
- Avoidant          Afraid of taking any risks or giving an opinion
- Dependent        Constantly seeking reassurance
- Passive/aggressive    Angry but does not show openly

Watching a group read the list was like watching a collective 'aha' moment.

**At least 75% of participants immediately pointed to one of the types and with more than a touch of emotion in their voice would exclaim "That's him!!" or "That's exactly what she's like!!"** Interestingly, we do not get the same intensity of response from delegates who do not work in the NHS.

### **What is personality disorder?**

A personality disorder is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "*an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the culture of the individual who exhibits it*". This manifests itself as:

- Rigid patterns of thought and action
- Deeply ingrained, maladjusted patterns of behaviour
- Problems with daily living and relationships

People with a personality disorder are observed to:

- Use bullying as a way of achieving their goals
- Display repetitive patterns of behaviour
- Be unaware of the impact that their behaviour is having
- Deny that they have a problem
- Have difficulty in sustaining relationships
- Consider their negative behaviours as virtues or strengths
- Have a hidden agenda
- Have little emotional intelligence and rigid, irrational beliefs

Sufferers have a predominant type or behaviour pattern, but can display characteristics of other sub-types.

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1 in 10 people have a personality disorder, ranging from mild to extreme. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has reported that the estimates of personality disorder in the general population range between 5% and 13%.

Some believe that extreme personality disorders are an illness and the person has little control over their behaviour. Others consider that it is more a behavioural trait that does not conform with the norms of the society that they live in. Whatever the cause, people with a personality disorder can attract fear, anger and disapproval rather than compassion, support and understanding. This is unfair and unhelpful as it is something that requires help.

### **Another personality disorder – social psychopath**

As well as the sub-types listed above, there is a more extreme type of personality disorder called the social psychopath. This character is ruthless, manipulative and often charming, but has a lack of conscience. Social psychopaths are fully aware of what they are doing and the potential consequences. They are self-assured, cocky and often domineering; willing to use and abuse others to achieve their ends.

Social psychopaths push their opinions onto others and cannot understand why anyone would disagree with them. The social psychopath never feels that there is anything wrong with his/her behaviour. It is everyone else who is in the wrong.

### **Personality disorders in management**

We all have preferences, prejudices, phobias, quirks, mannerisms and unique traits. Some annoying, others not. Some of these can be beneficial in a work context. For example, being focussed helps to get the job done and attention to detail is important in maintaining standards.

In our experience, the vast majority of departments, directorates and teams function well – often because of the variety of people within them.

However, in those situations where a group has somebody in their midst with a marked or extreme personality disorder, it can be dysfunctional, seriously stressful, exceptionally demotivating and very emotional for all members. The situation is worse if the person with the disorder is in a senior role.

There is a view that NHS managerial and clinical roles may be attractive to social psychopaths because of the power and control that the positions bestow, and they can thrive because dismissing staff is more difficult in the NHS. Although it can be criticised for being overly sensational, the HSJ reported recently that as many as 3.5% of “high potential” managers in the NHS could be social psychopaths, whereas the incidence in the general population is 1%” (HSJ August 2009).

The evidence from our research combined with the feedback we receive from both our workshops and also the professionals that we mentor has convinced us that personality disorders might be more widespread in the NHS than is realised. If our instinct is right, it would help to explain why the NHS has such high reported levels of bullying, stress and sickness absence.

It would also mean that calls to role model healthy lifestyles miss the point. What we need to do is role model healthy working relationships and healthy individual behaviour. It would mean that leaders who want to reduce sickness levels and improve patient care need to focus their action on limiting the damaging impact these people have on the other staff in their organisation.

### **The debilitating impact on colleagues**

The stark problem is that the behaviour of these disordered individuals causes a lot of stress for others. Stress is characterised by high levels of distress and feelings of not coping.

Stress is often brushed aside as an acceptable part of NHS life. Short term pressures are a part of everyday life. But ignoring the signs of long term stress is a mistake. Long term stress is an insidious health problem that limits our ability to do our best at work. Resultant dips in performance then further amplify and exasperate stress causing it to spiral out of control. That is when sickness absence starts. That in turn creates a vicious cycle of low staffing levels creating high stress levels and higher sickness rates.

Symptoms of stress include:

- Physical
  - Loss of appetite
  - Difficulty sleeping
  - Tiredness
  - Skin complaints
  - Headaches
  - Accident prone
  - Palpitations
  - Alcohol abuse
  - Increased / reduced eating
  - Musculoskeletal disorders
- Psychological
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Repetitive thinking
  - Irrational thoughts
  - Burnout
  - Low self-esteem
  - Poor concentration
  - Moodiness
  - Irritability
  - Anger
  - Withdrawn
  - Suicidal thoughts
- Emotional
  - Avoidance
  - Crying
  - Passivity
  - Isolation
  - Trying to please
  - Guilt

In addition to the points above, workshop participants or mentees often share a painful feeling of guilt and self-blame, using phrases such as:

- *"It must be my fault"*
- *"I'm not good enough"*
- *"What have I done wrong?"*
- *"What could I have done differently"*

These are often accompanied by declarations of despair:

- *"It's getting worse"*
- *"Everybody hates me"*
- *"This is never going to end"*
- *"I can't see a way out of this"*

To the outsider it is obvious that these beliefs are highly irrational and it is often clear that the person's colleague is the source of the problem. This demonstrates how thinking patterns become disturbed during times of stress, and how debilitating the psychological impacts of stress can be on a person's judgement and self-worth. It is no surprise that people go off sick so that they recover their health as well as protect themselves from further injury.

Sustained long term stress leads to low immune systems, high blood pressure and possible permanent organ damage.

Stress management techniques, such as relaxation and healthy lifestyles, can help to minimise the effects of stress. However, this paper is about dealing with the underlying causes of colleague-induced stress in order to improve your health.

## **How to respond - early recognition is vital**

Given the potential for this workplace menace to damage your health, it is essential to know how to cocoon yourself from their psychological blows.

Our work with clients recently in a counselling mode and our personal experience of working alongside people with personality disorder, has given us an insight into the best ways to tackle this character.

Spotting the early signs that your new colleague has a personality disorder is absolutely vital but not easy. It often takes a while to realise that all is not well.

Early warning signs include:

- Charming and over friendly (initially welcomed by the victim)
- Displays of confidence (with hindsight, overconfidence)
- Promises (which are hardly ever kept)

Over time the charm subsides and a different character emerges – perhaps intimidating, belittling or pressurising you. “It was like dealing with Jekyll and Hyde” is a common statement made by victims. Sometimes, professional jealousy emerges resulting in being excluded and sidelined. Another commonly reported warning sign is a change in the nature of their dialogue, from charming conversations to long rambling monologues.

This is the stage when you realise that something is not right. It then takes a bit longer to accept that your initial positive impression was wrong, and that something needs to be done.

However, responding to personality disordered harassment and bullying in the same way as other types of conflict by being rational can lead to escalation of the problem.

This is because bullies with a personality disorder have low levels of emotional intelligence and will not recognise the chaos their behaviour is causing. Yet they are often intellectually bright and so are good at using the system to meet their own ends. For example, by turning a complaint about them into a problem about you.

## **Get help from your organisation or other sources or leave**

So what can you do if you are the victim of the actions of a person with personality disorder?

Guides and textbooks (and even our courses) are full of well intentioned advice, such as:

- Tell your boss (great if your boss is a strong character, but he or she could be part of the problem or be reluctant to take action)
- Report it to HR (we have heard of many HR departments that have provided invaluable support – but we have also heard of others that seemed to be part of the problem)
- Make a complaint or take legal action or go to your union (this can address the issue, but you could be labelled as a troublemaker – and the action can be stressful in itself)
- Confide in a colleague (also good, but the perpetrator might have “knobbed” or formed a clique with the colleague or the colleague could have become loyal to the perpetrator [Stockholm Syndrome] – and will take the side of the perpetrator)
- Tell a friend outside work or contact a helpline (also good, but does not address the issue)
- Quit (drastic, but is often the only way out – unless there is little prospect of getting other employment, in which case stress levels will rise further)

### **Things you can do yourself**

The above actions all have their benefits. However, our experience is that you also have to prepare yourself mentally to cope with the situation. These are some actions that we have seen to be of help:

- Keep the perpetrator at a safe personal and emotional distance – do not engage with them, and do not confide in them as they will use it against you later
- Expect to be bullied, abused or manipulated, know your weaknesses and expect them to be used against you
- Anticipate your emotional response, and keep it in check
- Expect rejection from the perpetrator
- Try and avoid meetings on your territory – meet in a neutral public place
- Try and avoid one-to-one meetings, having a third party around helps to keep their behaviour in check
- Do not react when they have emotional outburst – keep silent
- Ignore their attempts to manipulate you by using guilt and responsibilities
- Try to ensure that your contact with them is on a regular, structured basis — avoid ad-hoc meetings if you can
- Call a spade a spade – if the perpetrator has had an emotional outburst, say so and do not cover for him/her – leave if necessary
- Ignore their attempts at control – let them know that you have your own views
- Be careful with enlisting colleagues unless you are sure they are on your side – if they have Stockholm Syndrome they will tell the perpetrator everything
- Develop a stress handling technique – we like diaphragm breathing – Google it to find out more

There are also steps you need to take about recording and responding to encounters. Bullies with a personality disorder will manipulate and distort events and conversations. We have heard many stories of a seemingly innocuous meeting being followed by an email which ignores all positive aspects but exaggerates a minor point into a major failing. So you need to develop an evidence base:

- Keep a diary which will provide evidence if needed and will also enable you to get things into perspective
- After every encounter, send a factual email with your view of what was said and agreed
- If they criticise you verbally or in writing, respond immediately in writing, firmly rebutting the allegation
- Try and send memos about serious matters rather than emails, as hardcopy is more difficult to copy and send round on a group email.

Above all else:

- Do not take the behaviour personally
- Listen to the insults/abuse/demeaning comments, but keep to the job in hand
- Stay calm and watch – leave if you want to

If you stand your ground, they will need to adapt to your needs rather than you being forced to react to their outbursts. This is why temper tantrums don't work in prison cells, psychiatric hospitals or in a police station.

[Note: we do not recommend the response of one commentator on an earlier version of this paper who suggested that you let the perpetrator know that they are picking on an even bigger psychopath who will beat them up!].

If your self-esteem is high enough, there is no problem confronting the perpetrator. Such confrontations can be uncomfortable for the perpetrator as you are bringing their behaviour to their attention. If they realise that each outburst is followed by an uncomfortable confrontation, then the number of outbursts will go down. You will have the most impact if you focus your feedback on the perpetrator's observable behaviours such as shouting, ordering, threatening, etc. A useful technique for confronting people effectively is the Three Part Assertion Model (John Bolton, People Skills, 1975). This involves:

1. Describe the perpetrator's behaviour
2. Tell them the emotion that it causes you to feel
3. Tell them the psychological or physical impact on you of that emotion

## **Helping the perpetrator**

People with personality disorder may suffer lives of rejection, anguish and alienation. The effects on individuals, families and society can be pervasive, chaotic and expensive - and cross many organisations, services and systems. (NICE 2009)

The evidence about what works best is weak because of small scale studies, the complexity of treatments and the motivation of the individual to change. However, the most common forms of help include:

- Professional therapy, such as counselling and cognitive therapy
- Placement in a therapeutic community group
- Medication

Other studies suggest that borderline personality might be related to frontal lobe damage, which is associated with sudden and dramatic personality changes, poor social awareness, emotional instability, aggression, irritability and impulsiveness.

The bottom line is do not try to “cure” the perpetrator yourself as the most likely outcome is that the situation will become worse for you.

Dealing with a colleague or employee with a personality disorder is challenging. Staff, including human resource professionals and general managers, should seek the help of a psychologist rather than try to deal with the person on their own.

## **End Note**

This paper has focussed on the impact that someone with a personality disorder can have on the individuals that they work with. However, when coupled with phenomenon of group dynamics such as “The Power of the Coat”, “The Power of the Crowd” and “Group Polarisation”, the disordered person can summon up the power to destabilise everything across their entire area. This will be the subject of the next paper.

## **We Can Provide Help and Support**

We are available every Monday in Cowbridge, to talk through your issues. It is completely free of charge – except the price of a cup of coffee and possibly a sandwich. Totally unconditional and absolutely confidential.

There are two time slots available every Monday – 10 am and 2 pm. It's first come, first served.

We look forward to hearing from you – see the contact details below.

---

© Monica and Terry Dennis, Healthcare Alliances,  
Britannia House, 11 High Street, Cowbridge CF71 7DP  
First prepared July 2009; last updated October 2009

We would like to thank all the people we have worked with us over the years for sharing their time with us. We would also like to thank our friends and colleagues who commented on early drafts of this paper – for obvious reasons of confidentiality we cannot name you, but you know who you are.

We welcome comments on this paper which:

- disagree with us
- agree with us
- amplify the points we make
- give a different perspective

Please send your comments to:

[correspondent@healthcarealliances.co.uk](mailto:correspondent@healthcarealliances.co.uk)

All *From Our Irregular Correspondent* papers and comments can be accessed directly by [clicking here](#), or by following the links to information services from the home page of our website: [www.healthcarealliances.co.uk](http://www.healthcarealliances.co.uk)