

northampton healthworker

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By healthworkers for healthworkers

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SICK ANGELS?

Management blame workers for high sickness levels

The recent 'sick angels' headline in the Chronicle and Echo confirmed what many of us already knew -

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A stressed out, overworked member of NGH nursing staff

Northampton's healthcare workers, particularly nursing staff, get ill far more than the national average. According to a report from the Healthcare Commission nursing staff at Northampton's district hospital take an average of 21.6 days a year off sick, as opposed to 16.8 for nursing staff nationally and 11.3 for a range of other occupations. Ask any nurse or healthcare assistant and we'll tell you some reasons for this - an extremely stressful job, being rushed off our feet due to chronic understaffing, poor health and safety measures (the RCN has highlighted in

particular needle stick injuries and severe back pain as major reasons for sickness among nursing staff), constantly being told that we can't take a holiday when we need one because there's no-one to cover for

us - it's a wonder we make it into work as often as we do! The major cause of overwork and stress in health

work, understaffing, is no accident. Figures published earlier this year showed that more than 800 NHS managers earn over £100,000 a year. Their combined salaries would pay for 1,100 consultants, 3,000 doctors or 3,80 nurses. Top surgeon Mike Lavalley recently resigned in anger at the vast amount of resources wasted on fat cat NHS managers who know nothing about health but a lot about money and meeting government targets. Dr. Lavalley told the Daily Express "It is my impression at the moment that there always seems to be money available to appoint new managers, but

Harassment & bullying at Princess Marina

Earlier this year increasing complaints of harassment and bullying by management at Northamptonshire's Mental Health trust (which includes Princess Marina hospital) came to a head as a packed meeting saw angry staff raise concerns about "severe intimidation" (Unison spokesperson) by management. Their accusations were confirmed by the resignation letter of William Franklin, former head of clinical governance who accused management of "undermining... hard working staff."

Unison has undertaken a survey of all 1,300 members at Princess Marina, St. Mary's (Kettering) and Isebrook (Wellingborough) and though specific statistics have yet to be released it is clear that harassment and bullying by management are considered serious problems across Northamptonshire's mental health trust. Members are being consulted to see if they would rather take individual or collective action to tackle this problem. This newsletter would always argue for collective action - individually they can pick us off, but together we're stronger.

Direct action against the marketisation of the NHS - a lesson from Northampton's history

28 years ago: Rita Ward and the Great Northampton Hospital 'lie-in'

We hear a lot these days about the 'creeping privatisation' of the NHS. We have a Labour government committed to turning our free National Health Service into just another business along the lines of the American model, which sees poor people refused medical treatment because they can't afford it. Although the current Thatcherite leadership of the Labour party is more vicious than most in its attacks on the NHS (foundation trusts and PFI schemes being their current weapons of choice) such thinking is, unfortunately, far from new. As far back as 1977 NGH was the scene of a battle against a Labour government's attempts to marketise the NHS which saw a brave housewife and rank and file trade unionists take on the government and NGH management.

Rita Ward, of St. James' Park road, Northampton had been in severe pain for 18 months and was waiting for a desperately needed gallstones operation. She was told she would have to wait another year - unless she coughed up £400 (a lot more money in those

up £400 (a lot more money in those days) in which case she could have it that weekend! Rightly outraged at this economic apartheid Rita determined that she would get the operation at the same time as she would have done if she was rich. Flanked by her family and local trade unionists Rita walked into the hospital, removed the coat which was covering her nightdress and laid down in an empty bed. The trade unionists informed the hospital workers of the situation and told them that they expected them to show some working-class solidarity and treat her like any other patient. The hospital workers obliged, looked after Rita and refused to remove her.

The next day it was national news, with journalists descending on NGH to cover the story. The right wing press screamed about 'queue-jumping' but others, notably Paul Foot, pointed out that there shouldn't be a queue in the first place and if there is one you certainly shouldn't be able to get to the top of it by being rich.

The outcome was that Rita got her operation in the next few days, and no other patients had operations cancelled or

deferred. As the Daily Mail and the Labour government tore their hair out Rita Ward, Northamptonhousewife, gave the country a lesson in how direct action and working-class solidarity can defeat the attempts of the moneymen to deny us our basic rights. The small victory we won in Northampton 28 years ago has, however, been followed by many defeats.

With the NHS being slowly run down and sold off, PFI schemes and 'foundation hospitals' introducing market principles into our health service and more and more NHS services being 'contracted out' to private profiteers how many more are being told, like Rita, that they have to pay for health care, but are unable to take the action she so bravely took?

"Rita determined that she would get the operation at the same time as she would have done if she was rich"

Is your health and safety safe and healthy?

Northampton General Hospital also has a poor record on health and safety issues - another clue, perhaps, as to why NGH's sickness record is so much worse than the national average. You would have thought they would have learned their lesson in 2003 when they were fined £7,000 for making a worker seriously ill by sending him to work in a confined space with a dangerous chemical. Health and Safety Executive inspector Joanne Prigmore condemned NGH management, accusing

them of "gross incompetence or ignorance at many levels." However, it appears that they have learned nothing - in March of this year a report on plummeting staff morale identified lack of health and safety training (with only 50% of staff receiving such training in the past year) as a major issue, and in June NGH management was issued with an 'improvement notice' by the Health and Safety Executive demanding improvement on precisely this issue.

It seems that no matter how often they are told NGH's senior managers will always prefer taxpayer's money to be spent on government imposed financial targets than on the safety and well being of their staff and patients. And then they blame us when we are off work due to sickness or injury!

SICK ANGELS? cont..

nurses are run ragged by hospitals that squeeze and squeeze and squeeze." Sound anything like your ward? Yeah, mine too.

When asked by the local paper to comment on the 37,500 working days lost to sickness every year at NGH the management had it's chance to acknowledge it's failures in these areas, apologise to staff for causing the constant sickness that blights all our lives and outline it's plans to reduce stress and injury at work by improving on it's abysmal health and safety record, employing appropriate numbers of staff rather than trying

to scrimp and save by making less of us work harder, stamp out unpaid overtime and ensure we can take our full holiday entitlement when we need a holiday, not when it's convenient for the bosses. Of course this isn't what they did – instead they placed the blame squarely on the

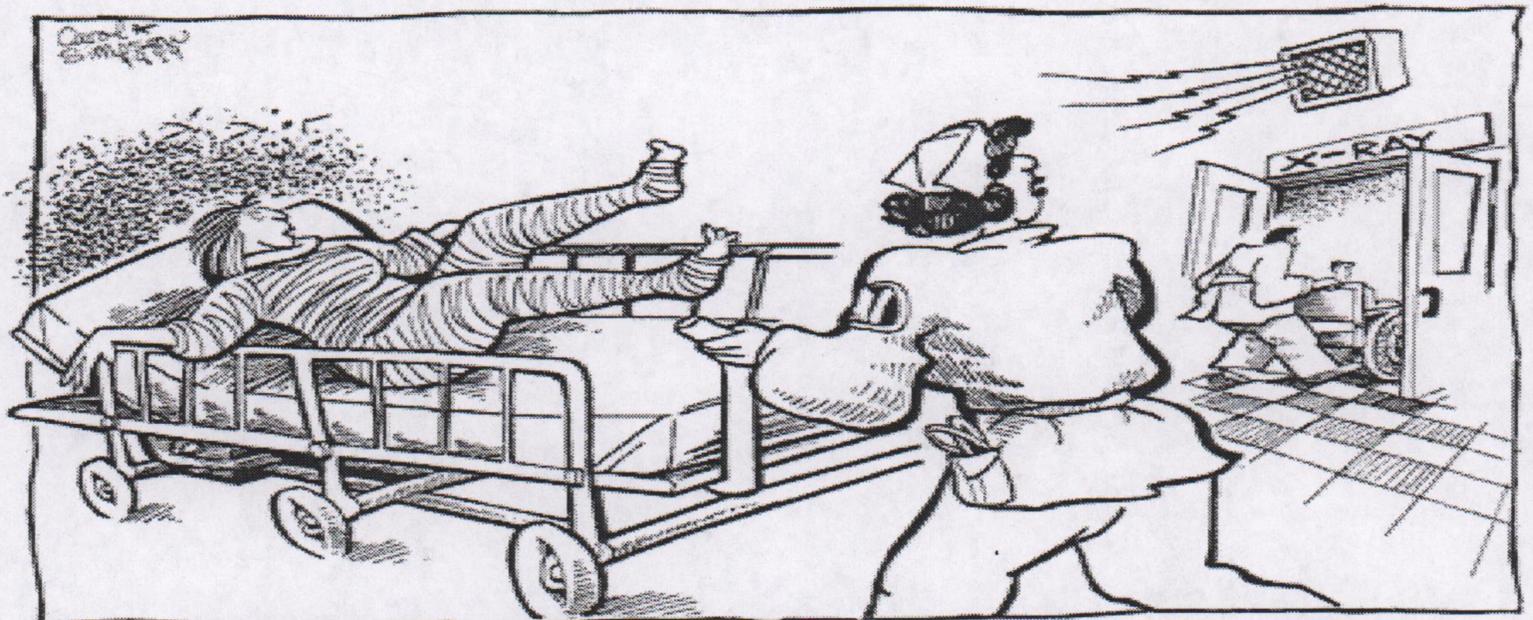
victims, the underpaid, overworked frontline staff who suffer from management's current policies. They used their statement to the Chronicle and Echo to make clear threats to any nursing staff reading the article that anyone taking sick leave would be hauled in front of management on their return to explain themselves: "When staff are back from being off sick they have an interview with their manager.....We are already seeing a reduction in the number of people off sick." There has been a lot of concern recently about a sickness policy that many workers consider to be tantamount to bullying and harassment, with managers putting more and more pressure on employees not to take time off. Some NGH employees might remember the posters that used to be put up around the wards about 15 years ago telling us "Don't bring your sickness in to work." Well now the culture of meeting short term financial targets regardless of the effect they have on staff or patients means that we are

actively encouraged, even bullied into bringing our germs into work. If you have experienced harassment as a result of being off sick (or for any other reason) why not contact us? Our email is on page 4.

Student victory

Three health students recently won an important legal victory allowing them to take paid maternity leave whilst training. The three trainee midwives had to halt their training when they became pregnant and were told that they would lose their bursaries. Despite a shortage of midwives the Department of Health was determined to defend their decision, one which would seriously discourage many women from studying not only midwifery but a range of other health professions in which students rely on a bursary. Fortunately common sense prevailed, opening the door for the many students in a similar situation. The trainees were backed in their case by a number of health unions, highlighting the benefits of union membership

"There always seems to be money available to appoint new managers, but...nurses are run ragged"



"Nurse Adams, please report to rooms 13 through 100 immediately... you have patients who need your attention."

News in brief:

St. Andrew's new smoking policy: bad

St. Andrew's is following NGH's lead in victimising smokers with a bizarre new policy which bans workers from smoking anywhere on the grounds apart from a couple of far-flung 'designated areas' - we can't even smoke outside, or in our own cars! This would appear to have less to do with protecting people from passive smoking and more to do with preventing people from having fag breaks, thus squeezing more 'productivity' from us. Northampton Healthworker predicts that this policy will fail due to the numbers of senior staff who will end up disobeying it. Why not join them?

Health workers strike in Argentina

Health workers in Argentina recently organised a national strike after their wages were frozen for three years. 77 hospitals, clinics and sanatoriums joined the action.

Health workers win equal pay deal at Aintree

Three one-day strikes at University Hospital Aintree recently managed to end the odious practise of employing a 'two tier' workforce of in-house and contracted out staff at different wages. The action forced private contractor Initial Hospital Services to negotiate on wages and come to an agreement on equal pay.

68% say "Staffing levels are usually less than the agreed levels."

This newsletter is produced by and for health and care workers in Northamptonshire. Every day we hear our workmates complaining about low pay, unpaid overtime, the constant stress and extra work caused by deliberately understaffed wards, attacks on our pensions, the job insecurity caused by running down and selling off of the NHS and the closure of care homes, the back injuries we get from being forced to do unsafe work and a thousand other daily insults designed to squeeze the maximum amount of profit from hard working employees in the health and care industries. Many of our union branches are undemocratic and don't really stand up for workers - some don't even have meetings that members can go to! This newsletter's purpose is to argue for the creation of a democratic, grassroots organisation which unites all of us who work in the health industry, is run directly by its members and allows us to collectively take control of our lives by standing up to managers, shareholders, and the government. We want to fight for such an organisation both inside and outside the existing unions, bringing together as many workers as we can. Ultimately we believe that the health and care establishments should be run democratically by healthcare workers and users, not by senior managers who often know nothing about health but a lot about money. If you are interested in working towards an organisation which is run directly by and for health and care workers and which allows us to gain some dignity, control and improvement in our working lives our contact email is below.

TOGETHER WE CAN DO THINGS WE CAN'T DO ALONE

In late 2004 a 10% cross-section of NGHT staff were invited to take part in a national survey. In

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NGH Operating Theatre Staff Survey Results

this April's 'Newlines' newly installed Chief Executive Andrew Riley reported that "the staff survey that has recently been published clearly show the impact that the necessary stringent financial controls have made on staff morale I am grateful to staff who filled in surveys and returned them - without frank and open dialogue difficult issues may remain unresolved" - Have any staff seen the results of this survey? - we are not aware of anybody who has! - so much for 'frank and open dialogue'! without the benefit of the elusive publication, we interpret the 'stringent financial controls' Riley refers to as the removal of staff water coolers last summer and the imposition of unpopular car parking charges - which provoked an inspiring rebellion by staff (sold-out by the big unions- but that's another story!). Veteran staff may

remember a similar survey open to all staff in the early-90's that disappeared into the black hole of the Human Resources Dept. - at that time a casualisation process,

resulting in brutal cut-backs of ancillary staff, was at it's height, under the guise of addressing the threat of Competitive Tendering. However, the results of separate survey of Operating 'Theatre Teams Staff Satisfaction Audit' has recently slipped out - Full marks to Surgical Directorate Managers for undertaking it - but more difficult reading for Andrew Riley though- and significant evidence that low morale is down to more than the new car parking fees. The news is not all bad - high levels of respondents are satisfied with job security, working hours and pensions - but much of the remainder is sobering reading:

Have staff experienced harassment/ bullying in the last few months?-
Response: 12% Often/45% Sometimes. Of the 57% who said they had experienced harassment/bullying: 89% of these confirmed that this was from another member of staff. 86% confirmed that this was from a senior staff member. 57% replied that they had witnessed other staff being

bullied.

I have the resources I need to do my job effectively?
-59% Disagree.

I do not find my job particularly stressful - 66% Disagree.

Theatres are usually staffed to agreed levels? 69% Disagree.

I receive the support I need to do my job effectively?
57.4% Disagree

Staff in Theatres are treated with respect and dignity? 54.6% Disagree.

Theatre Managers listen to the concerns of staff?
26.5% Never.
51% Sometimes.

Do Trust Managers communicate openly with staff? 44.1% Never 40.2% Sometimes. 2.9% Always.

If these responses are typical of the trust-wide survey no wonder management have buried it! It's time we got together and stood up for ourselves.