

Would NHS staff go to work during a flu pandemic?

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A survey of health care workers has revealed that as many as 85% may stay off work if an influenza pandemic did take hold of the country, according to researchers at the University of Birmingham.

The results of the survey, published in the open access journal BMC Public Health, suggest that levels of absenteeism may be significantly higher than current official estimates and that 'willingness' to work would play a stronger role than 'ability' in driving health care workers' decisions as to whether to go to work or not.

A team of researchers at the University of Birmingham carried out the survey in which 1032 healthcare workers responded to questions about the factors that may influence their decisions to work during an influenza pandemic. They were also asked what interventions might be effective in persuading them to work.

Responses suggest that healthcare workers' likelihood of working may differ by job type. While doctors were more likely to say they would attend, nurses and ancillary staff were more likely to say they would stay away.

The team note: "It is essential that health services are able to manage the major demands that will be placed upon them. Healthcare workers will be at the forefront of the response to a pandemic, and if services are to be provided at sufficient levels, absenteeism from work must be minimized."

The survey reveals that two significant factors would affect willingness to work during a pandemic. Workers' responsibilities towards their families, particularly those with children or elderly relatives, presented as a worry, as did the threat of those family members contracting the virus.

Secondly, concerns about the work environment affected the potential likelihood of working in a pandemic situation. These included the possibility of having to take on duties for which a worker felt they had not received training, being asked to work at a different place to normal, working with untrained people, or fears of possible future litigation if mistakes were made while working under abnormal conditions.

The authors advise that measures needed to be taken to persuade health professionals to continue working as normal in a pandemic and that these measures needed to be tailored to suit the individual job types. However, the research suggests that the groups who may be most in need of suitable interventions may also be the least receptive to them.

The team conclude: "Potential levels of absenteeism may be significantly higher than current official estimates, and that absenteeism could be particularly marked amongst certain groups of workers. This research provides important information to assist with planning for a potential influenza pandemic."

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Further Media Information:

Prof Sue Wilson, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology at the University of Birmingham is available for interview. Please contact Anna Mitchell, Press Officer, on 07920 593946 / a.i.mitchell@bham.ac.uk (<mailto:a.i.mitchell@bham.ac.uk>) to arrange.

Notes to editors:

The paper presents independent research commissioned by the National Institute for Health Research (www.nihr.ac.uk) under the Research for Patient Benefit Programme. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or Department of Health.

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