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NOISY WORKPLACE? EMPLOYERS MAY BE LIABLE

Kirsty Rogers – Head of Employment

Pub and club industry employers need to be aware of the risks loud music can have on their staff's hearing.

According to new research by the TUC and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf, some workers are being subjected to music as loud as an aeroplane taking off.

Currently employers must act if their staff are exposed to noise levels above 80 decibels on a daily basis, but tighter European Union rules are due to be brought in which will apply to the leisure industry in 2008.

More steps will be introduced to protect the UK's 500,000 bar and club workers, however simple precautions can be taken by employers to reduce the damage being done to the hearing of their staff without reducing the volume or turning their venues into libraries.

It's an issue that needs to be carefully monitored to ensure an employer complies with their duty of care and it may mean precautions are implemented similar to other industries where ear protectors are compulsory in noisy environments, such as construction and heavy manufacturing.

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Fighting fit

THE CBI SAYS SICKNESS ABSENCE IS COSTING UK BUSINESS £11.6BN, OR £476 PER EMPLOYEE EVERY YEAR. SARAH HONE TALKS TO DORIAN DUGMORE, A HEALTH EXPERT THAT SAYS IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

Health, or rather ill-health, has never had such a high profile as it's getting this millennium. Stories of soaring obesity levels, stressed-out workers and unwelcome smokers are never far from the headlines.

The personal struggle towards fitness and health can seem a herculean one, particularly when nearly a quarter of the nation's population appears to be eating and drinking itself into an early grave. But the struggle against the corrosive tide of sedentary yet stressful lifestyles, combined with a diet of salt and fat-laden convenience food, has at least one champion, who says that the North West is leading the way in a new wellness revolution.

Dr Dorian Dugmore, a cardiac rehabilitation and wellness expert of international repute, is a director of Wellness International, which provides corporate health services from its base at Adidas in Hazel Grove, Stockport. He says the new wellness at work industry is taking off in the North West more than in other regions as employers start to realise taking care of their staff is a priority they can't afford to ignore.

Dugmore is an advocate for what he calls "upstream medicine", which proactively and preventatively attempts to identify risk and make lifestyle changes before illness strikes and reduces a person's quality of life. "Most people live with downstream medicine, waiting for illness to occur then treating it. But upstream has to be the new philosophy. We can't cope with conventional medicine that treats after the event – just look at the waiting lists: healthcare agencies are struggling all over Europe."

The wellness revolution is being

embraced by many global blue-chip players. Names like Motorola and Johnson & Johnson, Unilever and Marks & Spencer have all invested heavily in the good health of their employees, while investment bank Goldman Sachs has launched a £5m wellness centre for staff in Fleet Street and has opened others in New York, Frankfurt, Singapore and Hong Kong. Along with Adidas, Goldman Sachs is considered a world leader in wellness policies.

"The really successful employers of the future are beginning to realise the value of providing corporate wellness and preventative interventions for their employees," insists Dugmore. "It makes perfect sense – they've got a captive audience because people come to work every day, so looking after staff has a major contribution to make to health."

Wellness International's strategic alliance with Adidas means it delivers the company's wellness programme to all 400 Adidas employees on site. It also runs a cardiac fitness programme for 75 stressed football managers and a health and fitness course for 300 chief executives from across the country. Agencies such as Sport England, and the minister for sport and culture, Richard Caborn, are adding their voices to the call to support corporate wellness schemes.

One North West company flying the flag for employee wellness is high street jeweller Beaverbrooks, whose head office is in Lytham St Annes. The business has earned a reputation for its caring attitude towards its employees, an outlook that earned it second place in this year's *Sunday Times* 100 Best Companies to Work For ranking.

Beaverbrooks has invested in a wellness programme for its senior management, run by Dugmore and his team as part of a wide range of employee benefits. "We feel it's all part of being a responsible employer," explains managing director Mark Addlestone. "Beaverbrooks relies heavily on its senior managers to drive the business, but we're aware of the problems stress and working too many hours can bring and so the wellness programme is part of redressing the work-life balance."

After an initial consultation and advisory visit 18 months ago the Beaverbrooks wellness plan involves twice yearly guidance sessions from Wellness International. But is the programme making a difference? "The fact is you can encourage people to change their lifestyles for the better but you can't force them," says Addlestone ruefully. "I think the wellness programme is undoubtedly making a difference as part of the whole package of measures we've taken, like providing fresh fruit in the office – it's part of the bigger picture."

According to Dugmore, in most cases the healthy-lifestyle message preached by Wellness International is seized on enthusiastically by employees eager for guidance on improving their health. "When we started delivering our corporate services, everyone said workforces wouldn't be interested but it comes down to how it's delivered. It has to be a non-threatening, user-friendly intervention and needs to be pitched from the angle of "you can do something about it – it's not too late: you can transform your lifestyle and reduce your risk". If you deliver it in that way the buy-in is tremendous – usually around 90 per cent – and we get terrific turn-outs."

Good news for staff also means cost benefits for employers. In the US, which leads the corporate wellness field internationally, for every dollar invested in corporate wellness the benefits are said to be worth between \$4 and \$6, realised in reduced absenteeism, decreased staff turnover and better team morale.

Corporate wellness can also inspire a tremendous image boost for businesses. Dugmore observes one of the most common reactions from staff when he and his team go into an organisation to deliver the wellness programme is: "If the



company cares about me enough to take an interest in my health and do this for me, it's the sort of company I want to work for."

For around £120-£150 a year per employee, a typical corporate wellness programme includes a comprehensive risk appraisal, based on lifestyle information together with the measurement of key markers such as blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose level and percentage body

fat. Based on an initial half-hour consultation, each member of staff is advised on how to make changes that can help them achieve lifelong good health.

"If companies really do value the people that work for them, they can make a huge positive difference for a relatively small investment in their employees' well-being," says Dugmore. These days a wellness plan could be as fundamental to corporate success as a business plan ▀

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