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Healthy Hospital Personnel

A hospital and its services, from nursing staff and doctors to management, is a business in which the daily concern of many employees is the health of their patients. Einsiedeln hospital recognises the equal importance of the welfare of its staff and has implemented a peer project as part of its quality management system. This type of project is unique in Switzerland.

People in charge at all levels in a hospital are well aware of the importance of dealing with the psychological aspects of distressing events. Typical examples might be challenging situations with patients, or supporting critically ill or dying patients as well as their loved ones. However other factors might include safety in the workplace, accidents, major incidents, catastrophes, and to an increasing extent, abusive patients.

Prevention and Intervention as Pillars of Support

The peer organisation concept of Einsiedeln hospital is based on the two pillars of prevention and intervention. The aim of prevention here is to make staff aware of the impact of distressing events. Health-promoting initiatives lay ideal foundations for this. Intervention in this case means that post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) amongst employees can be recognised in time and treated, or even avoided.

The director of the hospital, Reto Jeger aptly sums up the aim of the project as follows: "The most important resource of a hospital is having healthy employees. Our aim is to keep them in good health, and to swiftly identify and support vulnerable or distressed workers." A good start is to train all employees in recognising symptoms of PTSD. Following initial internal debriefings, an accessible team of specialised professionals can then be enlisted.

High Demands on Peers

Petra Reusser, in charge of quality management, specifies the following skills as essential for peers: "Peers should display strong mental and physical resilience and social competence. They are well-respected by their colleagues and have several years of experience in their work." They are only consulted on certain matters and have to be discreet. As trained caregivers they have to further and deepen their knowledge of psychosocial support. By attending professional training courses, they are trained in detecting signs of psychological shock following a distressing event.

Due to the high nature of the quality and the demands required, Einsiedeln is the second hospital in Switzerland to have been certified as a provider of psychological assistance since August 2011. The certificate is issued by the National Network of Psychological Assistance (www.nnpn.ch). The NNPN is an established faculty assigned to the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports.

Involvement of Professionals

The 'professionals' are experts who are externally consulted. They work in fields such as psychology, psychiatry, trauma therapy, counselling, consultancy and coaching. They can be enlisted by peers as soon as the need arises. Professionals can also be recruited to provide training in specific areas. They are bound by professional discretion.

Project Already Proven Successful

Two days after the conclusion of the project phase and its implementation in the hospital, the peer organisation had to prove its worth in Summer 2011. A political proposal by the Schwyz cantonal parliament put the future existence of Einsiedeln hospital in jeopardy. "Thanks to the peer organisation we were able to be there for and support anxious or distraught employees right away. Even at the most critical time of uncertainty regarding the future of the hospital, not knowing whether it would survive or be closed down, we didn't have a single resignation", says the director Reto Jeger approvingly. He was also positively supported by the peer organisation during this traumatic time.

Conclusion

The most important resource of a hospital is having healthy employees. The peer organisation of Einsiedeln hospital supports the health and welfare of its employees through prevention and intervention. Vulnerable staff can be quickly identified following distressing events in the workplace. In this way post traumatic stress disorder can be recognised, treated or even avoided before it is too late. Where necessary, a

network of external professionals can be called in. They work in fields such as psychology, psychiatry, trauma therapy, counselling, consultancy and coaching. In crisis situations the peer organisation can provide the hospital management with positive, competent support and reassurance.

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