Who’s helping nurses through menopause?

Health services risk losing experienced nurses because of a failure to acknowledge symptoms such as fatigue and hot flushes

By Ruth Devlin
a menopause consultant and independent expert for Health & Her. Having been out of nursing for 25 years, she recently completed a return-to-practice nursing course

Women aged 45 to 55, the core menopausal years, form the largest single age group on the nursing register.

Yet despite the large numbers of menopausal women in the workforce, managing the menopause at work is no easy feat.

A recent study of 1,000 women aged over 50 by Health & Her, an online resource that provides advice on menopause from nurses, GPs and gynaecologists, suggests that 14 million working days may be lost due to the menopause each year.

Fewer than 1% of the women affected by symptoms said they felt comfortable talking to their employer about the menopause. Indeed, they were more likely to leave their jobs than do so, it found.

Knowledge gap in support for staff

For nurses, the challenges can be magnified. Warm theatres and wards, and synthetic uniforms, can make hot flushes harder to deal with – and that’s just for starters.

While some NHS trusts are beginning to be aware of the issues, there is generally a lack of support for staff experiencing symptoms, which feeds into a wider dearth of education around the menopause.

Only 160 healthcare professionals in the UK have undergone the British Menopause Society’s specialist menopause training.

Nurses are on both sides of this knowledge gap, both as women receiving care and as healthcare professionals providing support to menopausal patients.

The failings around female health are beginning to be acknowledged. The launch of the first women’s health strategy later this year will address the need for a joined-up approach to female health.

While it’s a welcome initiative for which I have high hopes, it will take a change of mindset in NHS trust management for good intentions to trickle down to working nurses. Too many are being unsupported through their menopausal years, and there have even been reports of women being ridiculed when they take their concerns to HR.

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Experienced nurses who struggle with the effects of the menopause at work sometimes downgrade to part-time roles or lower pay bands

Options for coping with symptoms

The most symptomatic phase of the menopause, the perimenopause, starts in the early to mid-forties. Women become post-menopausal on average in their mid-fifties.

With the female population spending about a third of their lives post-menopause, it is vital for all women, including nurses, to educate themselves about the options available for coping with each symptom.

For many, the psychological symptoms of menopause can be the most debilitating, and when education about it is poor these symptoms come as a surprise.

Nurses with more than 30 years’ experience, used to being extremely efficient under pressure, suddenly find themselves having problems with loss of concentration and memory.

If unprepared, nurses can find symptoms such as low mood, anxiety and even panic attacks affect their confidence at work.

It is at this point that some of our most senior, talented staff downgrade to a part-time role or lower bands of pay with less responsibility.
With the right education in place the impact of this could be mitigated.

In addition to education, NHS trusts should take practical steps, such as ensuring regular breaks, access to water stations and comfortable uniforms.

Having an experienced, approachable member of staff to talk to about the menopause before symptoms become overwhelming would also help alleviate the pressure.

**Training and education sessions**

Courses should be short and regular so that nurses can re-educate, or have alternative options to attend if they can’t make the first session.

In-house training should also look at initiatives such as group cognitive behaviour therapy, which has been shown to have a positive effect.

With better education, nurses can help themselves, for example by trying coping mechanisms such as breathing techniques to reduce the intensity and frequency of hot flushes.

However, things will not change if management doesn’t acknowledge the menopause as a significant health issue that can affect nurses physically and psychologically.

An NHS that does not fully understand the impact of the menopause on nurses is not going to fully understand the impact of the menopause on patients either.

British Menopause Society
thebms.org.uk

NICE: Menopause summary
tinyurl.com/menopause-summary-NICE

Health and Her healthandher.com

**Workplace conditions**

Workplace conditions such as warm wards and synthetic uniforms can make hot flushes harder to deal with.

Symptom management in women undergoing the menopause
rcni.com/menopause-symptoms

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