SOME ASPECTS OF SICK ABSENCE IN INDUSTRY *

BY

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Though the Post Office must not be taken as representative of industry as a whole, it is, numerically speaking, the largest single industrial concern in the country, and probably the most various. Thus it has many thousands of outdoor manual workers in its postmen, engineering linesmen and skilled workmen; many thousands of indoor manual workers in its sorters, porters, telephonists and telegraphists; many thousands of clerical workers, both men and women, in its large administrative and accounting offices and in the Savings Bank and Money Order Departments; a considerable motor transport section; stores and factories departments; wireless operators, research workers, and the seamen in its cable ships. As an industrial medical service, that of the Post Office goes back to the middle of the last century and is probably the oldest and certainly the largest that we have.

It differs, of course, from most outside industries in that every established postal servant under a certain salary, is entitled to free medical service from the Department; and it differs also in that the great majority of its staff are established civil servants on a non-contributory pension basis, who receive annual leave with pay, and who also receive if they are away ill, full pay for six months, half pay for six months, and pay after that at pension rate, if they have given ten years service—provided that there is a reasonable prospect of recovery to render regular and efficient service in the future.

In order to determine the latter, the Post Office relies on its medical advisers—its whole-time headquarters staff of medical men and women, and its local Post Office doctors, who are general practitioners holding local Post Office appointments. There are about 2600 of these all over the country, and they attend the local staffs entitled to free medical attention, on a capitation basis, examine local candidates for Post Office employment, inspect and report each year on the sanitation, ventilation and general condition of the Post Offices and Telephone Exchanges in their area, and advise local Head Postmasters, Telephone Managers and other controlling officers on matters connected with the health of the staff. Each of them sends in an annual report to the Chief Medical Officer.

There is probably, therefore, in the Post Office, both in the way of actual treatment and the medical supervision of health and illness, a closer association with the staff than has yet been established in most other industries; and accurate sick records are kept of every Post Office employee, whether established or unestablished, for the whole of their Post Office careers—often from the age of 14 to the age of 60. These are all readily available for any Post Office medical adviser, who may be asked to treat or to report upon any particular employee; so that he can see, at a glance, what has been the medical history during the last 5, 10, 20 or more years. These sick records are, in normal times, assembled and classified every year; so that we can obtain the average annual sick rate for the whole Post Office staff, average annual sick rates for all its component groups, and in addition, the average annual sick rates for each of the big cities and very many smaller towns. This enables useful comparisons to be made between one year and another, between one group of workers and another, and between groups of workers in various parts of the country. It also enables, if anything abnormal emerges, inquiries to be made and appropriate measures suggested.

But, apart from this annual review, the whole process of medical supervision, centralized at headquarters, is continuous throughout the year. Cases in which so many sick absences have been incurred in any twelve months, in which some particular illness has lasted for such and such a time, are automatically referred by the relative controlling officers for medical advice; and there are scores of others which, for some reason or another, have come under medical notice, in which sick records are reviewed again in three months' or six months' or a year's time as the case may be, and here it should be added that all these medical reports and advice are regarded as strictly confidential. Further, and apart from the help which, it is believed, these accurate sick records enable the Medical Branch of the Post Office to give both to the staff and the department, they provide an immense and invaluable basis for the following up, on a large scale and over a very long period of the effects on working capacities of many disabilities—real or supposed—of various forms of treatment, both medical and surgical, and a useful guide to the worth or other-

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wise of those changing fashions, fads and fancies from which Medicine is, alas, not wholly free.

If, therefore, stress is laid upon these individual sick records, it is because they are the first and absolutely essential requisite in any really effective approach to the problem of health, happiness and efficiency—the all-important human factor—in any industry, whether great or small. Without them no management or medical adviser has the real information upon which to introduce a reform or lay down a policy, and it is perhaps a little surprising how very recent, and how very partial, has been the realization of this by industry as a whole.

Not many years before this war an endeavour was made, for purposes of comparison, to obtain some idea of their sick rates from several very large industrial concerns, but most of them replied that they had no such figures. Some of them, on the grounds that they did not pay their people when they were ill, frankly said that the question did not interest them and was not in their opinion worth the clerical labour that would be involved. There were a few exceptions such as Imperial Chemical Industries, the L.M.S. railway and various other firms who had begun to do so and were already employing whole-time doctors. But they were in a relatively small minority. Since the war, however, there has been a great increase in the number of industrial concerns and factories employing whole or part-time medical advisers and also, it is to be hoped, beginning to keep regular and accurate sick records.

With this foundation, any such firm has, at any rate, begun to get the primary data for comparing the health of their people from year to year; the health of those engaged in one process with those employed in another; and, even more important, the data for discovering where the bulk of their sick absence resides. This is usually in a minority group and particularly so in the case of multiple short sick absences for minor complaints, and it is perhaps in this field that the industrial medical adviser or works doctor can be most useful not only to his firm but to the staff under his care. And here emphasis should again be laid on the fact that malingerers and malingering—in the true sense of the words—are exceedingly rare in Post Office experience. During the 27 years of clinical work, in which about a quarter of a million patients were seen and some 14,000 visited, the present writer met with scarcely a dozen cases. There were a few people who developed convenient headaches or the like on the day of an important football match, and no doubt some of the alleged sufferers successfully got away with it. In fact some of them, in their maturer years, have admitted that they did. But this is inevitable and very human and its effect on total sick absence is negligible. There is, of course, the group of the neurotics or potential neurotics, but they are not malingerers; and there are many young people who may light-heartedly—and on rather semi-medical grounds—incur a good many

short sick absences in a year. When confronted in black and white with their own sick records, many of these are quite genuinely surprised; and a friendly talk with the medical adviser often results in a complete alteration for the better. Others, again, may be found to be suffering from some remediable disability such as carious teeth or septic tonsils and attention to these may again at once alter the complexion of their sick records. But there is yet another group, both of young and old people, in which the real underlying trouble is some private anxiety or unhappiness, some real or fancied grievance, some inherent dislike or fear of a particular task or part of it, or some temperamental strain in respect of a colleague or overseer. The works doctor, if he is wise and sympathetic, if he holds—as he should hold—the confidence both of the staff and the management, can do an immense deal to adjust or dispel all this. A change of work or a change of room, even the mere unburdening of the hidden trouble, can produce a quite disproportionate result in terms of health and happiness; and this is surely preventive medicine in one of its most real and practical forms.

All this is work, too, that it would be very difficult for a panel or private doctor to do quite as well, even if he could do it at all. It is true that he may know more about the worker's domestic circumstances and perhaps as much about his physical and mental make-up. But it is the industrial doctor, with the actual sick record before him, with his inside knowledge of the factory or office and their populations, who can—preferably in association with the panel or private doctor—most capably deal with this aspect of the problem.

But even more perhaps than medical supervision—as any experienced industrial doctor can testify—is the influence upon sick rates of what may be called the atmosphere, in the spiritual sense, of an office, department or works, and this is largely, almost supremely, dependent upon the management itself and the sort of supervisors, foremen or forewomen, whom it chooses. Health and happiness are fortunately as infectious as—indeed more infectious than—disease; and the right sort of supervisors, masters of their jobs but also themselves healthy, sympathetic, really interested in their fellows, and with the golden capacity of being blind at the right moment, can perhaps do more to reduce sick absence than any other single factor. As an illustration of this, some recently published figures may perhaps be referred to. They concern five groups of men and women all working in the same office.

AVERAGE ANNUAL SICK ABSENCE IN DAYS

		Men			Women	
1st year	..	15.0	15.4	14.7	24.5	25.8
2nd year	..	16.7	14.1	23.5	35.1	39.8
Change of lay supervision						
3rd year	..	8.0	6.9	13.2	22.1	12.9
4th year	..	7.0	7.3	13.0	14.3	10.7

As was mentioned at the time, the change of lay supervision was not the only factor in this transformation. But it was undoubtedly the principal one, the conversion of the office into what the sailors call a happy ship, and no amount of up-to-date gadgets, or the best equipped welfare rooms in the world will make up for the wrong sort of management or supervisors. And here perhaps another small point may again be mentioned. In every concern there must be rules and regulations. But it is not everybody in those concerns who understands the reason for them, and this lack of understanding may occasionally cause in somebody's breast a certain amount of smouldering resentment. Everybody in authority, therefore, should not only know the origin and purpose of those rules but be ready, if necessary, to explain them without feeling that their personal dignity is affronted. And since rules and regulations may outlive the circumstances that produced them, they should always be prepared, at least, to consider their modification.

Turning to some more general aspects of health and sickness in industry, there are a few basic considerations which should always be borne in mind by managements and their medical advisers, and one of these is the age composition of the staffs employed. In Post Office experience, careful observations over many years have gone to show that men over 40, as a group, incur 55 per cent. more sick absence than men, as a group, under 40; and women over 40, as a group, 58 per cent. more sickness than women under 40. The younger people incur more sick absences but these, as a rule, are of shorter duration. Then again women, as a whole, tend to incur more sick absence than men—in our Post Office experience about 10–17 per cent. more. This, of course, has a particular significance at the moment. Apart altogether from war conditions, as the proportion of older men to younger, and of women to men, increases in any works or office, there must be a normal expectation of an increased average sick absence rate. As regards causation, it is a general experience that the catarrhal and respiratory group of diseases is usually the largest; and in the Post Office it has been usually responsible for from 20 to 30 per cent. of our total sick absence; and this applies both to men and women. Digestive disorders account, both amongst men and women, for about 10 per cent. of our total sick absence, and we ourselves have found, as regards men, that the sick rates of the outdoor staffs tend to be rather higher than those of the indoor staffs. This is not necessarily because they are less healthy. But there are certain respiratory and rheumatic affections that might not prevent an indoor worker from carrying on but which might temporarily disable a telephone linesman or a postman.

As regards a normal annual average sick absence rate, it would be very difficult to dogmatize, especially in present circumstances; and in comparing one industry with another their respective natures and the age compositions of their staff would, of course, have to be considered. But based upon

Post Office experience, for a mixed staff of manual, clerical, outdoor and indoor workers under 25 years of age, a peace-time figure of about 5 days for the men and boys and 6 days for the women and girls would not probably be far wrong or enough to cause anxiety. For a whole mixed staff with, say, about a quarter of its men over 50 and a quarter of its women over 40, 8 or 9 days for the men and 9 to 11 days for the women would probably be somewhere near the mark in normal peace conditions. At any rate, something like these figures might serve as a datum line from which managements and their doctors could set out to study their own individual problems.

So far nothing has been said about war conditions, but if the study of sick absence is of the highest importance in industry at all times, it is surely even more so in a nation at war or facing the problems of its aftermath, and unfortunately, as regards the country's industries at large, there is rather a paucity of available figures. But if the 260,000 odd Post Office population is any sort of a barometer, there has not so far been evidence of any serious deterioration in health. In certain large cities, indeed, sick rates have been actually lower than in the three years immediately preceding the war. Amongst workers in other places, and particularly women workers—and particularly again in the more heavily bombed areas—there has been an increase.

But it has not been possible—apart from the direct effects of bombing, with its dislocation of travelling, loss of sleep, and added domestic stress—to disentangle any particular war factor that has definitely influenced sick rates. There are, for example, a good many workers who have been obliged, for long periods, to do their jobs in basements. But it has not been shown, given adequate lighting and ventilation, that basement working *per se* has been detrimental to health. Up to now the rationing of foodstuffs has not visibly affected working capacity; and this is also true of night work. Where the Post Office has experienced, apart from air-raid activity, a marked rise in sick rates, this has probably been mainly attributable to longer working hours and the curtailment of annual holidays, and particularly in certain of our departments where the work has demanded close attention and accuracy, but has been inevitably of a somewhat monotonous character. But even amongst these staffs, the extra days lost by sick absence have been a mere fraction of the extra days worked, as represented by longer working hours and abridged annual leave. And the Post Office system of sick record keeping is enabling the position to be closely watched.

In a few large departments in London, which were seriously affected by prolonged bombing, travelling difficulties and loss of sleep—and where the sick records began to show a danger signal—various measures were taken, such as improving canteen facilities, the staggering of meal hours, and the better provision of sleeping facilities on the premises for late evening and early morning

workers; and this was followed by an immediate fall in sick absence.

Finally, it is now probably true that, whatever their school of political or economic thought, those responsible for management in industry have fully come to realize that the men and women and boys and girls in the nation's workshops deserve at least as much care and attention as the equipment, which, would be useless without them. The real question is how this can best be fulfilled. A few not very new suggestions have been made; and if one more has been left to the last, this is because it is feared to be impracticable. But it has been found, particularly during the war, that in the smaller Post Office offices and exchanges it is very much easier for those concerned to realize the importance of their work. They are members of a family and not of a crowd; and if they are away they are really missed and they know it. In the larger offices and exchanges, it is harder for employees to feel this. If they are away for a day or two, it does not, at any rate, seem to matter so much.

But it is probably hopeless to expect smaller units in industry; and a great deal can be done—and is, of course, already being done—to try to foster the family spirit in the larger units. But there is one small point that perhaps might be mentioned. Managements and managers, roughly speaking, are the successes in industry. Working under the same roofs with them, are many scores of men and women, of no more than average ability, who can never expect to become this or who have seen what dreams of promotion they may once have had gradually disappear and die. But industry is not the whole, or even perhaps the best part of life. There are such things as music and painting and gardening and games. And it may be an admirable thing, from a great many points of view, for the chairman to be beaten at bowls by the stoker; or for the able young head of a department to discover, at a works concert, that he isn't in the same street with the elderly dud in the corner of the drawing office.