

Introduction by  
Dr Lanre Ogunyemi,  
SOM President

Occupational Health  
Awareness Week

Prevention is better  
than the cure: the  
power of flexible  
working

Upcoming SOM events

**som**

Supporting occupational health  
and wellbeing professionals

AUTUMN MAGAZINE 2023



*SOM nurses trip to Battersea Power Station in September*

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# Introduction



**Dr Lanre Ogunyemi,**  
*SOM President*

It was a pleasure to chair the SOM Board for the first time in September. We agreed to progress to a two-year Presidential term and start a process to elect the next President – for members to vote at an extraordinary general meeting for members on 13th December at the RCP. We also updated governance documents on conflicts of interest and ensuring clarity on funding international travel. Following SOM Council’s agreement in June, the Board confirmed a new (non-voting) membership category “[Professional Partner Membership](#),” intended for HR professionals and Managers.

SOM’s advocacy and awareness week activity yielded dividends in raising OH’s profile. We plan to launch an OH census in November which will provide a baseline for further development of OH and the OH workforce. Do take time to participate.

Finally, we have started planning for the next SOM/FOM conference in Belfast, June next year, and will announce this soon; and we have been exploring how to make the Board even more effective and plan to have a strategy meeting in the coming months.

## Some highlights from the SOM Leadership Conference



*Photos from the SOM Leadership Conference in September: Top - members of the Leadership event committee led by Dr Vicky Mason (4th from left). 2nd row, left- SOM Past President Prof Anne Harriss is presented with her portrait by the artist Dreph (commissioned by Barbara Grohs). 2nd row, right - Alex Goldsmith, CEO Medigold*



# Occupational Health Awareness Week

SOM and COHPA thank everyone involved, from the Federation of Small Businesses to the Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Work and Pensions, SOM and COHPA members and Occupational Health Companies who marked the event.

An increased focus on workplace health has never been more vital. With record numbers of individuals across the UK on long-term sick leave from work, and latest figures from the Office for National Statistics showing this figure rising, awareness of OH is crucial. It should remain an immediate and pressing concern for the Government's Autumn Statement. Occupational health is a key part of the solution with only 50 percent of people in employment having access.

This year's week started with a launch of new videos for small businesses on OH - you can watch and/or download [here](#). COHPA published a new Guide to OH for SMEs, available on our [SME page](#).

Events and activities in the week included a SOM Leadership Conference and the Wellbeing at Work Summit.

SOM also released a press release on new analysis on ill health in the workplace, read [here](#).

We'll see you next year for Occupational Health Awareness Week 2024, building on the results of this year.

Helping small businesses to **improve**  
**the physical and mental health**  
of their **employees**

Find out what is possible at: [www.som.org.uk/ohaw](http://www.som.org.uk/ohaw)

**Occupational Health  
Awareness Week 2023**  
*18-24 September 2023*

**SOM**  
Supporting occupational health  
and wellbeing professionals

**COHPA**  
Advancing Occupational Health & Wellbeing

# SOM Occupational Health Awards 2023 & Christmas Drinks Reception

Join us in celebrating the superb work that occupational health professionals undertake every day. The Awards showcase OH and its value to organisations and the wider community.

Categories are:

- Outstanding Occupational Health Initiative, sponsored by [NEBOSH](#)
- Outstanding Occupational Health Practitioner
- Outstanding Contribution by an Employer to Workplace Health and Wellbeing, sponsored by [Greys Specialist Recruitment](#)
- Outstanding Occupational Health Team
- Outstanding Contribution to Diversity and Inclusion, sponsored by [NEBOSH](#)
- Outstanding Contribution to the Development of OH Globally
- Outstanding Contribution to Occupational Health Research, sponsored by [Cordell Health](#)
- SOM Lifetime Achievement Award

Closing date: **Friday 10th November**. Free to enter. Rules of entry [here](#). Enter [here](#). If your company is interested in sponsoring an award, contact [Natasha.Sethna@som.org.uk](mailto:Natasha.Sethna@som.org.uk)

The awards will be presented at the [SOM Christmas Drinks Reception](#) in London on the evening of Wednesday 13th December at the Royal College of Physicians, London, 7.00-9.30pm. **Tickets are £25.**

The Reception will include drinks, nibbles and our annual SOM OH awards ceremony. Come along and celebrate what has been achieved by us all this year, meet old friends and new in a relaxed and picturesque setting.

**Thanks to our generous sponsors Cordell Health, Greys Specialist Recruitment, and NEBOSH.**



# Occupational Health Careers Day: a SOM & NSOH event

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SOM and the National School of Occupational Health (NSOH) would like to thank TFL for hosting the Occupational Health Careers Day on Wednesday 27th September.

There was a successful Nurses morning and Doctors afternoon session.

Thank you to those that attended and contributed.

If you are starting out in occupational health, visit our Careers page [here](#).

Thank you to [Greys Specialist Recruitment](#) for sponsoring this event.



*Pictured above: Dr Ali Hashtroudi, Head of the NSOH*

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# An “almost endlessly ambitious mission”: wellbeing in the RSPB

*By Jenny Barrett, Wellbeing HR Manager for RSPB*

“Your organisation is just about running bird reserves, isn't it? Surely that is good for people's wellbeing?” This was the reaction of a friend when I was appointed in December 2022 to the new role of Wellbeing Manager in the RSPB. This is far from the whole picture.

[The work of the RSPB](#) is wider than birds; our mission states, “We protect habitats, save species, and help to end the nature and climate emergency”. We have a staff group of over 2,600 and 11,000 volunteers.

As for many organisations, wellbeing became an increasing focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Support was put in place for the workforce, both through line managers and provision of a range of personal wellbeing and resilience resources. This secondary support was widely appreciated but there was a sense more was needed to investigate the causes of wellbeing challenges amongst the workforce and mitigation of these. My role was created to drive this strategic approach.

My appointment coincided with my final year of an [MSc in Workplace Health & Wellbeing through the University of Nottingham](#). This course enables the study of workplace wellbeing through occupational health psychology theory and research, with a focus on the application of this knowledge in the workplace – a perfect fit for my new role. My dissertation formed part of my initial evidence-gathering phase about where we are with workforce wellbeing. I interviewed 23 of our middle managers about what promoted and impaired wellbeing and their thoughts on what could be improved.

My findings revealed three high level themes perceived to impair wellbeing:

- The way work priorities are set
- Working from home
- Personal ideology (personal congruence)

Managers shared approaches as to how they ensured team members have clear and manageable priorities as well as ideas about how to enable connections and collaboration within remote working teams. They had fewer ideas about the personal ideology challenges.

This qualitative research generated rich data that supplemented the perhaps more common approach of using quantitative staff surveys. They have given clues as to where to direct our efforts in seeking further evidence, developing interventions, and evaluating those. The issue of work prioritisation shows the need to embed a wellbeing lens in all we do as an organisation.

Many organisations are grappling how to promote wellbeing in remote teams in the post-pandemic environment. We are currently working with academics, to use their knowledge and skills where that can help us.

The role of meaningful work and personal commitment to our mission is an area we plan to work more on. What is the role of meaningful work in mission-driven organisations like ours? What are the effects on wellbeing of working in the conservation sector? There is some interesting research to build on around mental health in the sector, the effects of ecoanxiety and optimism and how we might protect the wellbeing of our people and [support them when the causes of impairment cannot be removed](#).



## OH in the media



- Study into Record Number of People Off-Work Long Term Sick [here](#).
- Construction UK magazine article [here](#).
- FT tech innovations to boost OH [here](#).

## OH updates

- BOHS Women's Workplace Health Report [here](#)
- Ill-health and economic inactivity because of long-term sickness OBR brief [here](#) and ONS brief [here](#).
- NHS Suicide Postvention guidance [here](#) and film 'After Them' [here](#).

# Prevention is better than cure: the power of flexible working

By Jane van Zyl, Chief Executive Working Families



Our research found that three quarters of UK parents and carers are working additional hours, and a fifth of them say it is the only way they can manage their workload. Throw a cost-of-living crisis into the mix and it's no wonder that parents and carers are struggling to cope, especially those on a lower income. The lack of affordable childcare is impacting on the mental health of parents and carers. Our recent [Working Families Index Spotlight Report](#), which focused on the experience of lower-income families, found that 48% of parents of under-fives said that difficulties in accessing the childcare they need has been bad for their mental health, rising to 56% for those who have insecure contracts.

## **A flexible solution**

Workplaces depend upon the wellbeing of workers, and so taking workload seriously is critical. The [CIPD reports](#) workload as the main cause of stress. The way work is structured can also have an impact on wellbeing, and that's where flexible working becomes a powerful tool. Not only does working flexibly help parents and carers carry out their roles and responsibilities caring for loved ones, but the ability to do so has a knock-on effect. Our research found that, when given the opportunity to work flexibly, the outlook for families on a lower income is more positive.

Those with better access to flexible working were a third less likely to have to quit their job to manage childcare, 25% less likely to fall into debt, and half as likely to have had their mental health negatively impacted due to the difficulty accessing childcare.

### Think flexible and family-friendly working

Progressive employers have been showing how to support employees with innovative practices. Here are some of our top tips for employers, inspired by our [Best Practice Award](#) winners in the mental health and wellbeing category:

- Be flexible to safeguard mental health. Tailored flexible solutions ensure that individual needs can be met. Formal and informal flex can support parents and carers manage the juggle and help reduce stress and worry. Design roles flexibly and let prospective employees know you're [Happy to Talk Flexible Working](#) by including our strapline and logo, developed with the Government's Flexible Working Taskforce, on job adverts.
- Foster an open culture - a strong community and personal connection is paramount to a sense of wellbeing. Peer support sessions, buddying, and joint tea breaks create an environment where individuals can talk with one another about their experiences, struggles and challenges.
- Make sure help is on-hand - reach every member of your organisation. Having representatives who work in every area and site of the business, who can cascade information and share their own experiences to break down stigma, can be impactful.
- Be proactive - build conversations around wellbeing into review processes; for example, in an annual health check that includes questions around mental health. This helps identify those who may be struggling as well as normalises mental health conversations.

- Provide a network of support - a powerful way to provide advocacy and connection. A network can be multifaceted, from empowering individuals to speak up and spotlighting diverse leaders, to providing resources for support and addressing barriers through collaboration with HR.

- Be a force for good - facilitating group volunteering helps employees build connection to each other and the wider community by coming together to make a positive difference.

- Ensure there is board-level support - someone at a senior level to support policies around mental health can be very effective in getting results. Having a Wellbeing Champion on the board can ensure policies are supported from the top down.



**Jane van Zyl**  
Chief Executive [Working Families](#)

[Working Families](#) has over 40 years' experience in helping employers implement flexible and family working.

Contact the team today:  
[employers@workingfamilies.org.uk](mailto:employers@workingfamilies.org.uk)

# Benefits of OH stats

OH Provider, PAM, has produced a [benefits of early intervention report](#), which contains the following stats:

- Referring people into OH before they become too sick to work can reduce absence by 64%.
- 91% of people referred into OH, while they were still in work, were expected to be in work one month later. This compares to just 45% of those referred between 1-2 months of absence and 27% of those who had been off for over six months.
- Despite the benefits of early OH intervention for reducing sickness absence, 38% of managers wait until the employee goes absent before offering support.
- More than one in two (55%) of absent employees are only referred into OH once they've been off sick for over a month.

## SOM special interest groups coming up

- **Diversity and Inclusion** - Tuesday 31st October 2-3pm
- **NIHL** - Tuesday 31st October 3.30-4.30pm
- **MSK** - Wednesday 1st November 2-3pm
- **CESR Support Group** - Tuesday 7th November 4-5pm
- **Academic Forum** - Friday 17th November 12.30-1.30pm
- **Drug and Alcohol** - Monday 20th November 3.30-4.30pm
- **Long COVID** - Monday 4th December 4-5pm
- **Sleep** - Tuesday 6th December 11.30am-12.30pm



Contact [Nick.Pahl@som.org.uk](mailto:Nick.Pahl@som.org.uk) if you wish to join any of the above



# Joint RCN and SOM Occupational Health Conference

**Friday 1st December, 9am- 4.35pm**

**Join in-person or online at this popular one-day conference**

We are delighted to announce that the RCN and SOM Joint Occupational Health Nursing Conference is now open for bookings. This conference will inform on a broad range of topics designed to support the continuing professional development and well-being of occupational health nursing professionals. Programme topics include risk factors and solutions for burn out, working with terminal illness, an update on hand-arm vibration, and much more. This is a hybrid conference and delegates will have the option to join us in-person at the RCN HQ, 20 Cavendish Square, London, W1N 0RG for those all-important networking opportunities with peers, speakers and exhibitors. Alternatively, content will be accessible online. Places are limited, so don't delay and book yours now. Don't miss this unique opportunity to:

- discover the latest developments in occupational health - including neurodiversity, Long COVID and impact of the menopause in the workplace.
- refresh your understanding of new approaches and controls related to irreversible work-related risk, specifically noise induced hearing loss and hand/arm vibration.
- reflect on advanced professional leadership related to burnout and terminal illness, and how to get support or provide support through mentoring.

Book [here](#).

## *Occupational Medicine update*

**Authors' Workshop** - Friday 1st December 9.30am-4pm, London and also via Zoom. For authors wishing for guidance on publishing a paper in OM or if you would like to write up your dissertation for publication. Authors are expected to give a 5-10 minute presentation (depending on numbers attending) on their research or abstract using PowerPoint. Free to attend. CPD certificate upon completion. Lunch provided but not travel expenses. The Workshop is interactive - attendees will be expected to participate fully. Please email interest to Angela Burnett [omj@som.org.uk](mailto:omj@som.org.uk).

**Book reviewers required** - Although no fee is payable the reviewer does get to keep the hard copy book or e-book! Guidelines on how to write a book review for the journal in-house style is available along with the book criteria. If you are interested email Angela at [omj@som.org.uk](mailto:omj@som.org.uk)

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# Thoughts on Mental Health First Aid in the Workplace

*Abigail Hirshman, Co-chair, Mental Health Group, Council for Work and Health*



A few weeks ago, I delivered some mental health training for managers. During the session I was asked what you should do when someone has a panic attack. I gave some pointers and also mentioned their mental health first aiders might be able to provide support. When a participant asked, 'What is a mental health first aider?' I nearly fell off my chair.

The person then said, 'Oh, so in a mental health emergency we have to ask them for help?' 'Well, not exactly,' I replied. 'Oh, so they train others in mental health...?'

'Well, not exactly,' I replied. Clearly my explanatory skills needed some work, however it struck me afterwards to wonder what the purpose of mental health first aid (MHFA) is, and what value it can bring to the workplace.

This is particularly topical, as the private members bill proposed by Dean Russell MP to make MHFA a legal requirement is approaching its [second reading in parliament](#). Whilst we must assume that Mr Russell is acting with the best intentions, his lack of consultation with industry experts is concerning, given that many of us view this proposal as misguided and reductive.

Myself and colleagues at the Council for Work and Health (CfWH) have supported the approach taken by three ex MHFA Board Members, Amy McKeown, James Brown and Robert Manson who have [written to Mr Russell seeking a wider and much needed consultation](#). At the CfWH we have long debated the merits or otherwise of MHFA and concluded that there is a place for it in the workplace. However, we believe it is ill-advised to mandate an intervention, where the [evidence of its effectiveness is so limited](#). There are also a number of other unintended consequences of this approach.

Firstly, it is a distraction; the cost of mental health problems is [equivalent to around 5% of the UK's GDP](#), and those with a long-term mental health condition lose their jobs every year at [around double the rate of those without a mental health condition](#) to address this requires proper training for managers and leaders of the benefits to making practical and supportive adjustments at work to those who live day to day with a mental health condition.

Secondly, it removes any obligation to consider the wider risk and protective factors to mental health at work. The implication that mental health is a static state that works just fine until you have an 'accident' and need first aid suggests mental health is fixed rather than a dynamic and complex experience driven by our early experiences, our genetics and our current environment. In 2022, [the World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) published guidance highlighting the risks associated with mental health at work, none of which will be resolved by MHFA and nor should they be. MHFA is not a preventive measure but like physical first aid is aimed at those in need of immediate help.

Thirdly, this proposal ignores the need for an informed debate on mental health and how the workplace can be both a cause and a cure. The [Stevenson Famer report](#) triggered a huge change in the way we think and talk about mental health at work.

Whilst this has generally been positive, it is also clear to me that just because we talk about something more doesn't mean we understand it more. Six years on from the report, I continue to hear the same old tropes and biases, none of which will be eliminated by mandating MHFA.

We are starting to learn from research, lived experience and expert insights what is effective. This potential bill has galvanised industry experts to collectively debate what government could mandate that would actually make a difference. Mental health is complex, there is no one cause or one solution. Mental health at work doesn't just happen on a Thursday or on a # or because that lovely lady in accounts trained as a mental health first aider. It is about organisations taking a strategic, systemic and systematic approach that evolves and adapts in line with the changing workplace landscape.



**Abigail Hirshman**  
Co-chair of the Mental Health Group at the Council for Work and Health and Director of Charlie Waller Workplace.

# Rapid Access to mental health assessment and treatment for healthcare workers: Insights from the Cambridgeshire NHS Staff Mental Health Service

*Tuesday 14th November, 1-2pm*

## **FREE SOM Webinar**

In this talk, Dr Muzaffer Kaser will discuss the establishment and outcomes of the Staff Mental Health Service (SMHS) in Cambridgeshire, UK, which was set up to address the growing mental health needs of healthcare workers, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SMHS provides rapid access to multidisciplinary mental health care for over 25,000 healthcare workers. The service has been locally funded and offers secondary level mental health care, including psychiatry, psychology, mental health nursing, and occupational health nursing.

Rapid access has been at the heart of service. Two key performance indicators were contacting patients within 3 days of referral (met 99% of the time) and offering an initial assessment within 2 weeks (met 92% of the time). In patient feedback, 85% said they were able to access help from SMHS quickly. The service incorporates a research component to measure outcomes and effectiveness.

External funding has supported a Health Economics Evaluation study, aiming to provide evidence of the service's cost-effectiveness and benefits related to presenteeism and retention.

The SMHS has served a significant percentage of NHS staff in Cambridgeshire, and patient referrals mainly consist of those with complex needs. The service utilizes digital elements, including remote consultations, to accommodate the wide geographical area and ensure accessibility. The SMHS has demonstrated significant improvements in mental health measures, receiving overwhelmingly positive patient feedback. It is considered an exemplary model to support the mental health needs of NHS staff during a time when an available and efficient workforce is crucial.

NHS Employers Case Study on SMHS resource [here](#).

Register [here](#).





## SOM Conference: HAVS - management issues

Common problems in the practical management of HAVS -  
results of a consensus study

*Tuesday 30th January 2024, 10am-3.30pm*

The **SOM Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) Special Interest Group** first met in September 2017, and agreed “currently much practice is subjective”. Chaired by Roger Cooke and then Ian Lawson, the group produced a number of documents to assist colleagues, available on the SOM website. The main document “The identification and management of hand arm vibration syndrome” was revised and updated in December 2020. Since then a number of other documents have been produced covering associated issues such as carpal tunnel syndrome, the use of nerve conduction studies, the use of photography, whole body vibration (WBV), and WBV and pregnancy. With the onset of the pandemic, guidance about remote health surveillance was produced jointly with the Faculty of Occupational Medicine. The Group has reviewed external documents and publications relating to HAVS, and heard invited speakers on specific topics of interest. In the six years since its formation the group has grown and now has 79 members. A Delphi Study from December 2022 reviewed specific issues related to HAVS, about which there is no definitive evidence. Results were presented to the International HAVS conference at Nancy, France in June 2023. Since then the full research report has been completed and provides a basis for this one day conference.

View the full programme [here](#).

Cost to attend (includes refreshments and lunch): £125 SOM for members; £175 for non-members.

Register [here](#).

Kindly sponsored by [RPS](#).



# Upcoming SOM webinars

Webinars are free to SOM members and £30 to non-members. *NB. For a member discount to be applied, please login to your SOM account before registering.*

List of upcoming SOM webinars [here](#).

- Recognising and managing eating disorders in our day-to-day clinical work, Tuesday 31st October 12-1pm - [register here](#)
- Do we really need the concept of burnout in occupational medicine?, Monday 6th November 4-5pm - [register here](#)
- Earl Dotter Presents: A Life's Work in Occupational and Environmental Health Photography, Monday 4th December 4-5pm - [register here](#)
- Digital MSK tools for the workforce - benefits, challenges and learnings, Tuesday 23rd January 4-5pm - [register here](#)
- SOM/ANZSOM Learning Together Series: Burnout and improving the health of healthcare workers, Wednesday 21st February 8.30-9.30am - [register here](#)



## About the SOM

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is the largest and oldest national professional organisation and with an interest in OH. It demonstrates a commitment to improving health at work, supports professional development and improves future employability enhancing our members' reputation and employability. Members are part of a multidisciplinary community – including doctors, technicians, nurses, health specialists and other professionals – with access to the information, expertise and learning needed to keep at the forefront of their role. Members benefit from career development opportunities alongside practical, day-to-day support and guidance, through local and national networks that are open to all. Through its collective voice, SOM advances knowledge, increases awareness and seeks to positively influence the future of OH. Join us - at [www.som.org.uk](http://www.som.org.uk)

## SOM Membership offer survey

We are currently investigating ways to improve our membership offer. We have created an online survey in the link below which will help us find out more about what potential members want: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/89J6CSW>. If you could help us by completing the survey, that would be great. As a thank you, upon completion of the survey you have the option to receive a discount code for joining the SOM as a new member.