

## Stress

by Lyndon Shearman - Former Member of the Institute's Board of Governors.

### Newsletter Article - October 2002

“But we can’t do that!” protested the group of managers for whom I was running a training course “They’d never allow it.”

What had I suggested that provoked such a response? They had been telling me how, quite routinely, they would spend two or three hours driving from one factory to another, do a day’s work, then drive back all in the one day. All the managers agreed it was excessive and during the drive back, they were tired and should not really be driving.

What I had dared to suggest was that they travel on the train, or stay overnight. Their company travel arrangements actually allowed them to do these things, and no one had ever told them to travel there and back in a day, they just did it.

The managers told me of other stressors, which were mostly accepted rather than imposed, so I asked them why they put up with these things. “The money’s good” they said “and we have our mortgages to pay”. I asked them what would happen if they dropped down dead from the pressures.

“Oh, one guy did” they said “so they named a building after him.”

It seems that people will put up with almost anything if the price is right. These managers were prepared to sell their health to pay their mortgage. They were, it seemed, even prepared to die for the company. No doubt some would be impressed by their loyalty, but this was surely not loyalty, but rather a distorted set of values that puts money before health, family and life itself. And they are not alone.

Tackling the problem of workplace stress must include tackling society's value that often put money before health. Risk assessments, coping strategies and supportive therapies are a start. As safety professionals we have to show people that they have choices, that saying no is a right, if that is better for your well-being. We have to support people in making choices, without choosing for them.

However, is this a valid role for the safety professionals? Is it right for us to get involved in issues which are more to do with ethics than with legislation? What new skills might we require? Contact the Institute and tell us your views.

And those managers?

“Lyndon,” they said “you’re too outspoken. You’ll never work here.”

“Dead right” I said “and that’s *my* choice!”