Conference Report

Working abroad: stresses and solutions

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Take 12 male scientists who know each other only slightly or not at all, isolate them in the Antarctic for two months, and subject them to a constant battery of physiological and psychological tests, and the result is a complete breakdown of personal relationships, which persists even three years later when the results are presented and published. This extreme example of "expatriate stress" was presented at a symposium on the subject held on 28 October at the Royal College of Physicians—but another example was even more extreme.

Sir Geoffrey Jackson, former British ambassador to Uruguay, described how he was kidnapped and taken hostage by Tupamaro guerrillas in January 1971. He was held in a prison like "a birdcage in a chicken coop" for eight months, during which he was subjected to physical squalor and sensory deprivation. He survived to advise anyone finding themselves in such circumstances to: firstly, try to establish as far as possible a routine; secondly, play dumb, by not showing anything such as a knowledge of the language; thirdly, count the days backwards not forwards, giving yourself credit for having lasted out for so long already rather than setting targets for the future; fourthly, give yourself a purpose for survival, be it for your country, family, or religion; and, finally, allow anger or frustration but never despair.

These two extreme examples illustrate the stress that can arise under difficult and unfamiliar circumstances, and many people and their families experience great strain when working abroad: some come home early, but many more suffer insomnia or anxiety or turn to drink.

"Hello Mister!"

Most expatriates expect differences in food, climate, and clothing, and it is usually in relating to other people that "culture shock" occurs. People tend wrongly to assume that fundamental ideas about social behaviour are common to all cultures, leading to what Professor Karl Heider, professor of anthropology at the University of South Carolina, described as the "Hello Mister" syndrome. For example, in Moslem areas of Indonesia expatriates who violate Indonesian social norms because of the way that they dress and show affection and anger relinquish the right to be treated as social beings. Thus small children shouting "Hello Mister!" at foreigners as they walk down the street are not trying to start conversation but simply reacting as they would to animals on display in a zoo. The "chucking" under the chin, the hair ruffling, and the cheek pinching of expatriate children by Indonesian women and the lack of privacy afforded to expatriates shown by the reading of letters and

postcards over their shoulders also show how the Indonesians strip of social status anyone they consider not to be conforming.

Last year Bob Geldof, impatient with the apparent inactivity of the Indonesian authorities to clamp down on the makers of pirate videotapes of the Band Aid concert organised to raise funds for famine relief in Africa, finally lost his temper and accused the authorities publicly of shielding the people responsible. The newspapers and public opinion in Indonesia, which had until then supported Geldof, quietly dropped the issue, and nothing was done. Geldof had "lost face" by publicly displaying his anger and was ignored from then on.

These differences need to be understood, and Professor Heider's advice to those going abroad was that they should try and adopt the dress and customs of the country in which they are working. They will then have some social status and belong more, which should reduce the stressfulness of being in a strange country.

Career couples

A newer problem results from more women going out to work. The families of male employees whose wives also have careers may face many difficulties if the company wants to send them abroad. Joanna Foster, head of the Pepperell Unit of the Industrial Society, and her husband Jerome, associate dean of the Versailles Business School, described how Joanna's career started to take off after they had moved back to Britain after living in France for seven years and in the United States for three. When her husband was then offered another job in France she decided to remain in Britain with the children while Jerome worked in France during the week and returned at weekends. Their strategy for reaching a practical solution of being a "commuting couple" was communication, consultation, and compromise.

Stress in wives, however, is not confined to those who work. The wives of offshore oil workers face special difficulties posed by the "two weeks on, two weeks off" work routine of their husbands. Most tolerate or even enjoy such a routine, but in 10% it leads to the "intermittent husband syndrome," signalled by large fluctuations in mood, tension, and despair. The capacity to be alone is a sign of emotional maturity; without the constant presence of their husbands emotionally immature wives often turn to alcohol or sexual adventuring for consolation. This in turn upsets the husband, leading to problems at work and completing the vicious circle.

Selection criteria

So what can be done to minimise the effects of stress on expatriates and their families? Much attention has been paid to training staff before sending them abroad and on monitoring and supporting them once they get there, but little attention has been paid to the actual selection of staff. The reasons for this include lack

of awareness on the part of the agencies sending staff out, a lack of candidates to choose from, unclear selection criteria, and unproved selection methods.

The personality of the worker is obviously an important consideration: certain types of personality are more likely to respond in a stressful manner to changes in employment, be they in Britain or abroad. Impatient, self sacrificing people who are overly competitive, hostile, and inflexible and feel a great need to be in control of their lives are more likely to sink into a stress related spiral (figure).

Stress related spiral showing how stress does not affect performance at work until late.

Like charity, social skills begin at home, and people who find it difficult to form social relationships with people in Britain are unlikely to do any better abroad. About one fifth of people lack the most basic social skills because of a lack of learning experiences in early life, distortion of behaviour by racist or sexist attitudes, and unfamiliarity with a culture. Dr Angela Summerfield, a psychologist from Guy's Hospital and Birkbeck College, London, said that success in relationships was governed by two types of behaviour. The first, showing warmth and interest in others, includes eye

contact, variety in facial expression giving praise, asking questions, and self disclosure. The second is controlling behaviour, which is the ability to exert influence and achieve desired ends, and this includes speaking in a loud clear voice, keeping an erect posture, making positive statements, and general assertiveness.

But how is the success of different methods of selection to be measured? An expatriate may seem to be successful at his job, but this does not mean that he is not suffering from stress as his work will not be affected until relatively late (figure). Returning home early from the job does not seem to be a terribly good indicator; the British tend to pick people because they seem to be "a good sort," while the Japanese spend a year training their staff before sending them abroad, yet the return rates for both countries are similar. Better indications are job skills under conditions of limited support, job related communication skills with locals and other expatriates, and family adaptation.

Caring companies

After staff have been selected companies can do much to help them cope while abroad. Training in both formal and informal behaviour before sending them abroad is obviously important. For instance, in the United States there are now more women than men entering the traditional professions such as law and medicine, and companies sending staff over there should make them aware of any sexist attitudes that they hold towards female supervisors and advisers. Training should also include the chance to talk to other workers who have returned recently from "the field" to ask about everyday living conditions.

Once there, three factors act as buffers against despair. Firstly, the support of other people is important—not only for the worker but also for his or her family. There should be colleagues or counsellors with whom they can discuss problems or difficulties. Secondly, workers' free time should not be eroded because of uncertainty about what they are supposed to be doing or what is expected of them. Expectations and roles should be clearly defined, with the emphasis on time management, and company exercise or social facilities should be provided if possible. Thirdly, the company should provide constant feedback and recognition of the work that is done, provide career counselling (and maybe a "sponsor" in Britain so that the expatriate does not feel that he is losing touch with developments at home), and develop technical and interpersonal skills.

The problems of selecting the right people to work abroad and keeping them happy once they are there obviously resemble problems occurring in normal practices at home. The best advice to potential candidates seems to be: "Be prepared—and tolerant."

CLINICAL CURIO

Chronic venous leg ulceration in obesity: successful treatment by jaw wiring

Venous leg ulcers are often chronic and are associated with previous deep venous thrombosis, varicose veins, oedema, and self neglect. Obesity is often present, but recent reviews of treatment for venous leg ulcers do not include weight reduction.^{1,2} We describe a case that shows the importance of weight reduction in the treatment of venous leg ulcers in a massively obese patient.

Case report—The patient, a 51 year old woman, weighed 161 kg (height 173 cm). Her weight at 35 had been 144 kg and at 45 had been 146 kg. Professional advice on dieting on numerous occasions had failed to achieve consistent weight loss. For 20 years she had had oval venous leg ulcers above both medical malleoli. For most of this period she had attended hospital outpatient clinics six to 10 times a year and received daily dressings from a district nurse. She had been admitted to hospital on four occasions for prolonged periods to dress the ulcers. In 1981 both legs received skin grafts, but they were unsuccessful. In 1982 she required transfusion with seven units of blood after haemorrhage from one of the ulcers. In October 1985 she

underwent jaw wiring and started receiving a 800 calories liquid diet with vitamin supplement. During seven months her weight decreased by 51 kg to 110 kg. The leg ulcers healed completely within three months and remained healed six months later.

This case emphasises that obesity can play an important aetiological part in chronic venous ulceration. The ulcers in this patient had been present for 20 years resulting in huge expenditure in time and money on medical and surgical treatments, all of which were unsuccessful. We treated successfully both the chronic venous leg ulcers and obesity by jaw wiring—a cheap and simple procedure.³

Obesity should therefore be treated energetically in patients with venous leg ulceration. If weight loss is not achieved by diet alone a more aggressive approach is required.—M E ARDRON, medical registrar, I A MACFARLANE, consultant physician, and E D VAUGHAN, consultant maxillofacial surgeon, Walton Hospital, Liverpool L9 1AE.

1 Anonymous. Diagnosis and treatment of venous ulceration. [Editorial.] *Lancet* 1982;iii:247-8.

2 Negus D. Prevention and treatment of venous ulceration. *Ann R Coll Surg Engl* 1985;67:144-7.

3 Garrow JS, Gardiner GT. Maintenance of weight loss in obese patients after jaw wiring. *Br Med J* 1981;282:858-60.