

**COI LIVE EVENTS AND BROADCAST FACILITIES
TRANSCRIPT OF GOOD JOBS, GOOD HEALTH CONFERENCE
HELD AT THE INSTITUTION OF CIVIL ENGINEERS
IN LONDON
ON TUESDAY, 10 OCTOBER 2006**

Rosie Winterton

Thank you very much indeed Liz. I am very conscious that I am sort of keeping you from your lunch, but I did want the opportunity just to come along and say how pleased I am that today's conference is taking place. Because as you all know by now, I am sure, the link between health and work, defining what is a good job, they are all key drivers in the joint Department of Health, DWP, Health and Safety Executives, health, work and wellbeing strategy.

And just a quick reminder of some of the facts. 2.5 million people here in the UK will right now be suffering from ill-health caused or made worse by their work, and more than 35 million working days are lost every year to ill-health, and that means an annual sickness absence costing something like £12 billion a year. Now I believe very strongly that as a society we simply cannot afford to allow this to continue, and that is because there is an effect on the individual, there is an effect on communities and there is an effect on society as a whole. It can mean that people become trapped in poverty and ill-health, that is a scar on our society, but also there is a very strong economic case to be made for saying we cannot allow this kind of waste. The inefficiency it causes within business, falls in productivity, just make it impossible in some instances for us to compete in an ever globalised world. And the joint health, work and wellbeing strategy that we have put in place, we hope will start to tackle some of those issues.

To help drive it forward we have established a joint Ministerial group that I chair with Philip Hunt, who I know was here earlier. We have set up a national stakeholder council with representatives from the public, and private and voluntary sectors, from business, from trade unions, and I think you can see that obviously with Dame Carol's role, which is very much part of the strategy, she may be learning but I get the feeling that she is already leading some of the debates, and that is to be welcomed.

So today's conference is extremely important, and I do want to congratulate the Health and Safety Commission for putting it on because again it helps us take that debate forward. And seeing in the audience that partnership approach reflects it. I know you have had speakers from government, but also here we do have employers, we have trade unions, we have people from academia, and again that is all about putting in place these building blocks to make sure our strategy works.

Now in the Department of Health we are doing a lot to try to improve health for working age people and I think today is a busy day for Department of Health announcements. We have got the Prime Minister in Tower Hamlets, who has been trying to encourage businesses and public sector, and the voluntary sector, to all join together and say what can we really do to make a difference to people's health, providing more healthy options, whether it is in business or indeed from businesses out to customers.

The Small Change, Big Difference campaign that we launched back in April, which again is about saying you know what are the things, maybe with not a

great deal of effort, can make a difference to people's lives, make them healthier, walking up the stairs instead of taking the lift, these kind of things that can make that difference. And again that is building on the work that we did in the White Paper "Choosing Health", and today again we are publishing the next steps on that – Health Challenge England – which again looks at how we can make a greater difference to people's public health, looking at a new direction for that.

But I have to say most of us spend a lot of time at work, I think it is up to 60% of waking hours, so the workplace does offer a real opportunity to promote good health messages to both employers and to employees, as well as looking at how we can tackle some of those causes of ill-health. And what we have tried to do through the Health, Work and Wellbeing website is to actually give some examples of good practice, employers such as the Royal Mail, Manchester Airport who are quite frankly leading the way in terms of supporting a healthy workforce.

But I wanted to refer particularly today to a document that we are launching to mark World Mental Health Day, and I think obviously World Mental Health Day, there is no better day to remind people that 1 in 4 of us will suffer from a mental health problem at some point in our lives. And that is why we have launched this morning Action on Stigma, which is about promoting mental health and ending discrimination at work. What we want to do, through this document, is to consult with employers, and I hope that people in this room will take the opportunity to look at this document and give us some feedback on it, to say what is it that you have been doing that can help people with mental health problems at work, but what else is it that we can do more to assist you in that process? And I think as Bill said this morning, something like 13 million working days a year are lost due to depression and anxiety. And two things have happened today. Alastair Campbell I think was on the television this morning, and has been on quite a lot since, talking about his particular problems, but saying that he actually had a good boss in Tony Blair who understood some of the problems and was flexible and considerate about it. And I was down this morning at Bromley in something called Horizon House where I met with employers and people who had mental health problems who were given a tremendous amount of support in actually getting back into work, and we had there people from Marks and Spencer, Gap and so on, who actually said we will work with the local Primary Care Trust and we will provide what was called a transitional employment programme where they had people who would come in, sometimes for maybe just 6 hours a week, but they would actually support them in that process.

And they also, through the Primary Care Trust, provided support to employers. And I cannot tell you how moving it was to see people whose lives had been transformed simply by employers taking a new attitude towards their illness. And when I talked to some of the employers as well, they said that the experience of working with people who had these mental health problems had actually meant that it changed their view of how they treated all their employees as well and to make sure that they did have proper processes in place so that people could be given support in troubled times, and quite

honestly they said the pay-off was enormous, the loyalty they had from employees, reductions in sickness absence, all contributed to in a sense a complete culture change. And I hope that by setting out some of the principles that we hope that employers would join in with in terms of our Acton on Stigma, then we can create that kind of atmosphere in other places as well.

So some of the principles that we are asking employers to consider, how they can support employees to look after their mental health, how they can promote a culture of respect and dignity for everyone, how they can encourage awareness of mental health issues in the workplace, and of course to demonstrate that no-one is refused employment on the grounds of mental illness or disability, something of course which will shortly be enshrined in law, but also to look at what adjustments could be made to the working environment for people with mental health problems, and also to make sure that there is, and this was very interesting from the conversation I had with the woman from Gap this morning who said that in a sense what they had done had made them very aware of how to perhaps treat with dignity and respect people who might come into their premises, customers who might have mental health problems, and how did they make sure that what they were doing for employees actually extended out there as well, and again that was, she said, good for business.

So I hope that through this initiative we will be able to help employers reduce the incidence and impact of mental health problems because there is absolutely no doubt that everyone has a role to play in this, and if employers can join with us that will make a real difference. And we want employers to actually own this initiative, that is why we want to spend a few months actually listening to what employers have got to say about whether and how it is possible to enshrine these principles in their practices, and we will next year publish an action plan as to how we can take this forward.

So Liz frankly I think that the success of our health, work and wellbeing strategy does depend very largely on the outcome of the kind of discussions you are having at conferences like this. And if we can successfully align the meaning of truly good work at the levels of the individual, the organisation and at society's level, we know that that should lead to long-lasting improvements in the health and wellbeing for all people of working age. And I think that if we can get that right, we can see lots of Horizon Houses that you as employers as well are able to support, but also to know that you have the right policies in place as well to give support to what can be very vulnerable people, but also people who can make your businesses work.

Thank you.