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Project Wingman – A short survey of staff perception and lounge benefit in a large UK NHS Trust

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Abstract

Project Wingman is a novel initiative conceived early in the COVID-19 pandemic by two airline captains and a psychologist, which brings airline style lounges, staffed by volunteer air crew to NHS Trusts. The aim was to boost morale by providing airline style customer service for staff while on breaks. Over 50 lounges were opened across the NHS, staffed by up to 5000 volunteers. In this pilot study of one large Trust, we surveyed staff who visited the Wingman lounge. 100 completed questionnaires were used as an end point. All staff felt that the lounge was beneficial during COVID. 62% reported that they would visit the lounge even it was not attended by aircrew. 57% felt their wellbeing had suffered during the pandemic. A national study would be useful to assess the impact of the Wingman Lounges, but our pilot study highlights the importance of staff wellbeing and the value of taking breaks while at work. Many of the lessons learned in supporting colleagues during the pandemic could be used and adapted to help future wellbeing initiatives and aid retention of staff across the NHS. © 2022 The British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Shortly after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in July 2020 a novel initiative for NHS was conceived by two airlines captains and a psychologist and given the name Project Wingman.¹ Working in partnership with NHS Trusts, many aircrew including pilots and cabin staff volunteered to staff aptly designated ‘First Class Lounges’ to bring airline style customer service to staff while on rest breaks. Over 50 Wingman lounges run by more than 5000 airline pilot and cabin crew volunteers were opened during the pandemic. (Table 1).

The idea was to try and help improve NHS staff morale. Staff are met by crew dressed in uniform (as fellow professionals) and offered a hot drink and snack (Fig. 1). To add to the effect of ‘getting away from work’, decommissioned

reclining business class airline seats were installed in many lounges. There have been many positive social media messages about how these lounges have boosted morale and that staff can forget about NHS work for a short period.² Wingman and local hospital Trust wellbeing initiatives might be particularly beneficial for staff morale and especially for those who were redeployed to other parts of the hospital to help with the surge in admissions during the early parts of the pandemic.³

The importance and effect of stress and fatigue on individuals who provide services within organisations (including the NHS) cannot be underestimated. After the Germanwings Tragedy of 2015, when an Airbus A320 aircraft was deliberately crashed in the French Alps killing all on board,⁴ the UK pilots Union (BALPA) successfully persuaded the introduction of a Peer Assistance Network (PAN) by many airlines to help address mental health issues. Project Wingman was an offshoot of this initiative. A program of focused offers and

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Table 1

Questions that were asked in the short survey with a simple Yes or No response.

Have you visited the lounge before?
Do you find the lounge relaxing and provides some personal space?
Do you feel supported and valued by the volunteer aircrew?
Would you/do you visit the lounge out of hours when no crew there?
Do you feel supported by colleagues in your departments/teams?
Do you feel supported by hospital management?
Has your wellbeing suffered during the pandemic?

support may also help improve the mental health, experience, and wellbeing of NHS staff in the workplace.

Despite the widespread Wingman programme, to our knowledge there are no published reports of its potential value to NHS staff. In this pilot study, we aimed to assess if the Wingman initiative benefitted staff during COVID in our large acute NHS Trust.

Methods

A short paper questionnaire was designed and distributed to NHS staff members who visited the Wingman Lounge by the volunteer aircrew over a random three-day period in May 2021. To improve staff engagement (particularly as the lounge is a place for downtime), only seven questions were included, and it was designed to be completed in under a minute and only contain yes/no answers instead of a more complex Likert scale. We used 100 completed returned questionnaires as the end point to facilitate result interpretation (as a %).

Results

During the hours the lounge was staffed (usually 0900–1600), approximately 170 visited (including medical, nursing, administrators and management staff) giving a questionnaire response rate of about 60%. This was calculated by using the ‘check in’ register of contact details by staff visiting the lounge, required as part of the COVID track and trace regulations. As a result of the latter and to maintain social distancing requirements, only four or five guests were allowed in the lounge at any one time. Despite the lounge being opened in March 2021 and advertised throughout the hospital, 31% were attending for their first time, while the remainder (69%) had visited at least once before. All 100 respondents felt the lounge was beneficial and provided some personal space in a relaxed environment. 36% felt supported and appreciated by the volunteer aircrew and 62% reported that they would visit even if no crew were in attendance.

91% and 55% of NHS staff felt that they were supported by colleagues and hospital management respectively. Finally, 57% of respondents felt that their personal wellbeing and morale had deteriorated during the pandemic while 37% thought it was unchanged and 6% had improved morale.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased work pressures with stress, burnout and mental health issues being more common than before.^{5–8} The need to relax and recharge away from busy clinical duties is more important than ever. From the



Fig. 1. A Wingman wellbeing lounge, complete with reclining seats to enhance staff experience.

results of our short survey, and from personal feedback from both volunteer aircrew and other staff, Project Wingman has been of benefit to those who used the lounge in our Trust. Furthermore, 62% stated that they would visit the lounge out of hours (when no air crew were present), suggesting that the lounge facilities, including the reclining aircraft seats, were valued by staff for their wellbeing.

At one stage over the summer of 2021, there was a freezer installed with ice lollies generously funded by the hospital charity. However, these proved popular out of hours with stocks depleted rapidly once the crew had left. As a result, this initiative could only be maintained for a 2-3 week period.

As an added benefit, many Trusts were able to capitalise on the human factors (HF) experience of airline pilots involved in the Wingman project to help train staff in more effective team working and communication. The Whittington Hospital was the first site to introduce the Wingman lounge and it subsequently expanded these services to include HF education through in situ simulation. Feedback from staff has been positive.⁹

The pandemic has brought many challenges but also opportunities for better patient safety and team working. Many HF principles can be readily adopted in clinical practice including lowering team hierarchy, improving communication, and ensuring staff take regular short breaks when possible to optimise their own performance and facilitate the best care for patients. The importance of eating and rehydrating regularly while at work cannot be over emphasised.¹⁰

With early signs that the pandemic may be over the worst, some Trusts (including our own) have now withdrawn the Wingman Lounges. While this was perhaps inevitable due to aircrew returning to flying duties as countries began to open their borders, the value of wellbeing and relaxing at work should not be forgotten, especially given the huge backlog of benign surgical patients awaiting treatment. Employers should ideally be doing everything possible to ensure the wellbeing of their employees to help improve and maintain morale and reduce burnout and stress. This is important especially with increasing numbers of staff retiring early or leaving the NHS.⁷ A designated area such as a wellbeing lounge could provide a useful space for staff to visit during their breaks to have a brief period of rest and relaxation away from the pressures of work.

A more comprehensive nationwide study would be a more powerful method to fully evaluate designated and staffed lounges on morale and wellbeing across the NHS. Such a study might also provide valuable information to NHS leaders and Trust Executives about how simple initiatives such as wellbeing lounges can help improve staff morale and feeling valued across organisations. Providing adequate rest facilities and ensuring food is available for staff

at all is essential to maintain optimal performance and help improve patient safety.^{11,12}

The experience of managing COVID-19 and its impact, individually and collectively, on staff wellbeing has brought into sharp focus the potential benefits of supporting staff in new and innovative ways, at a time when the daily pressures on staff, combined with the increased risk of moral injury, exhaustion and burnout have been at levels never seen before across the NHS. Our staff are our most valuable resource, and it is hoped that many of the lessons learned in supporting them through the pandemic will be captured for the future wellbeing benefit of individuals, and the wider retention of staff, across the service.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest.

Ethics statement/confirmation of patients' permission

Not required.

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