

The occupational health nurse

The tough world of building demolition may be the last place on earth you'd expect to find award-winning nursing care - but a hard hat and wellies have become standard uniform for nurse Susannah Elvy.



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Formerly a urology nurse specialist, Susannah is one of a team of four nurses employed by Building Health, which provides on-site general and occupational health care to the demolition and construction industry. As Susannah explains, it can be a particularly challenging environment: “The men are transient and can often be working away from home for months on end. They work long hours, six days a week. And if they have a day off, often they don’t get paid – so even if there’s something wrong, they don’t go to their GP.”

Launched in 2005 by Susannah’s sister Nichola, the company carries out a range of general health assessments –including blood pressure checks, urine

testing, respiratory disease and vision screening – plus more specifically targeted examinations for noise induced hearing loss and hand arm and whole body vibration syndromes. In addition, there’s a range of medicals for those who work in more hazardous environments, including asbestos removal or on contaminated land. Health promotion plays a part too, with advice on smoking cessation, alcohol, diet, the prevention of skin cancer and early detection of prostate cancer.

In 2006, one of the company’s clients – leading demolition contractor, Brown and Mason – won Building Magazine’s Best Occupational Health Initiative. The award recognised the company’s partnership with Building Health to set up a comprehensive occupational health service. Here, screening revealed that one-third of workers failed an eye test and 40 per cent needed ear syringing. Meanwhile one in 10 was referred to their GP for further tests or treatment. “Hypertension is a big issue,”

says Susannah, with poor diet, lack of exercise and heavy smoking all playing their part in elevating blood pressure.

Engaging men’s interest in their health can be difficult at the best of times, but perhaps doubly so for macho builders – yet so far at least, the service has been a resounding success. “It’s gone down really well,” says Susannah. “In many ways it feels like a perk of their job. Many of these men haven’t had any access to health care for a long time, so they seem to welcome it. Plus time is money, so being on site is a real bonus.”

For Susannah and the team, it’s also helpful to see at firsthand the jobs the men are doing, so they can properly assess any health risks, giving expert advice to prevent harm or accidents. One area where they have had notable success is combating potential hearing difficulties. “When you say to a 19 year-old man ‘you have the hearing of a 50 year-old’, it’s quite a powerful message,” says Susannah. And although workers may be afraid of being ridiculed by their colleagues if they choose to wear proper protection, as she says: “We tell them you’ll look an even bigger fool if you have to wear a hearing aid in a few years’ time.”

Susannah believes that an entirely nurse-led service gives the men an opportunity to be more forthcoming about any health concerns. “Just us being there seems to help them open up,” she says. “Sometimes they’re not aware of the risks they face. As nurses, we can delve a little bit deeper into their situations, perhaps spending that extra five minutes talking. It’s definitely not just about ticking boxes.”

Interview and story by Lynne Pearce

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