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4.5 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of St. Saviour of the Chief Minister regarding policies and practices governing the health and well-being of States of Jersey employees:

What improvements, if any, does the Chief Minister intend to make to current policies and practices governing the health and well-being of States of Jersey employees, with particular regard to those employees who may be experiencing stress-related conditions?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

Our Occupational Health Service provides a good quality service for employees with health issues that may impact on their ability to work. The organisation stress policy is being revised to meet U.K. Health and Safety Executive standards endorsed by the States of Jersey Health and Safety Inspectorate. Support for employees suffering from stress is available from the AXA personal help support line. There is also online eCounselling available.

4.5.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I am very pleased to hear that the stress policy is being revised. I am sure lots of employees will be pleased as well. Is the Minister aware of a template letter that has been distributed to chief officers in States departments which warns sick employees that they are being strictly monitored and does he believe that this is the best way to help employees back to work by threatening an escalation into formal absence management procedures if their absence is not reduced?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not have a copy of the letter circulated to chief officers that the Deputy refers to but I do have a copy of the letter the chief officer for Education sent, I believe, to all employees about the work that they were doing to manage sickness in a better way, that is better for those who work and are not sick and hopefully for those who are sick; that is considering the cost, the number of days lost because ultimately the services that we are providing as a Government are for the benefit of our community. Yes, we have got to be compassionate. Yes, we have got to be considerate. Yes, we have got to do all that we can to help people who are suffering from illness to be able to recover and to return to work but we have got to fundamentally remember that if we are working for the Government of Jersey we are there to serve the public of Jersey and that has to be our top priority.

4.5.2 Senator Z.A. Cameron:

Has any consideration been given to the impact of the loss of G.P.s (general practitioners) independent practitioner status now that they are also regulated and likely to be wholly funded by Health and Social Services in the future with regard to the provision of stress related health issues independently provided through that service to State employees?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure how I can answer that question with respect to the Senator, because there seemed to be so many assumptions about where the provision of primary care service is going to land, and therefore I am not sure there is much merit in me trying to answer that question.

4.5.3 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Apologies if this figure has already been published and I have missed it but could the Chief Minister indicate how many people currently are off sick with stress related illness? He may not be able to do that right now but perhaps he could after the Assembly?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I can do that. Perhaps I could just revisit Senator Cameron's question. I think I understood what she was trying to drive at but there were so many assumptions in there that it was difficult to answer. If I take the Education Department in answer to Deputy Lewis, I believe that last year they

lost almost 10,000 working days due to sickness absence but if you calculate those working days it comes to £1.4 million but I will try to get the figures or the numbers for right across the States.

4.5.4 Deputy T.A. Vallois of St. John:

Could the Chief Minister explain whether there is any evidence of employees with stress or anxiety-related issues that have undergone issues with regards to the bullying and harassment policies that we have in place in the States?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not have any numbers in front of me but I have got no doubt that there would be a correlation in some cases because bullying and harassment, and even sometimes whistle-blowing and tipping-off, they are stressful situations and they can cause people to suffer stress and be off work in that regard but I do not have any numbers.

4.5.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Can the Chief Minister in his responsibility for using the group AXA to negotiate over illness and sickness issues and, occasionally, leaving the workforce, has there ever been an assessment of the cases that AXA are involved in and their successful outcome or otherwise? Is there any evaluation of the use of AXA in the process of sickness and illness among public sector staff?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not have that information in front of me. I imagine there will be and if there is and it is publishable I will try and get it to the Deputy.

4.5.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

If there is not, will he assure Members that there will be an assessment done of how successful AXA is?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Indeed. Thank you.

4.5.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I just wanted to further press the Chief Minister on my previous question which I am not sure was answered. What impact does the Chief Minister believe that saying to employees they are being strictly monitored when they are ill and threatening them with procedures will have on their health? Bearing in mind that long-term sickness is not just things like stress, it can be things like cancer and things like that. Will he undertake to investigate this letter and the policies behind it to ensure that it is not having a negative impact on employees' health and perhaps investigate a more compassionate approach?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It is a balance that needs to be struck between, as the Deputy has just mentioned, a particular illness that an employee might be suffering from which requires long absences from the workplace, requires a careful, compassionate and understanding approach, and those which I think are completely different where individuals on a number of occasions might be taking a Friday and a Monday off. The reason it has got to be a balance is because in the one case it could happen to anyone and it is right that an employer deals with that fairly and, on the other hand, that has a detrimental morale effect for the remainder of the employees. When you take absence management systems like the Bradford Factor, even though it may not be perfect - and I am not sure there is a perfect system - it looks at the number of absences. It does not necessarily just look at the total length of absence, because it is sometimes an indication of whether someone has got long-term issues or they are behaving in what I think most employers would think was an inappropriate way. That is what those sorts of process-driven absence management schemes try to do. So I think that

we have got a fair process but, as I have said, it is always right to review it and that review is being undertaken. But we have got to be careful that we do not demoralise the rest of our employees by allowing people to be ill, be out of the workplace and be absent without [**Approbation**] appropriate action.