

**Interviewer :** I'm here talking to Gillian Body the Wales Audit Office Partner involved in the follow up report on the management of sickness absence by NHS trusts in Wales . Gillian could you tell me about what the report looked at, and its main findings?

**Gillian Body:** Today's report looks at the progress that NHS trusts in Wales have made in improving their management of sickness absence, since 2004 when we previously reported on this subject.

Clearly, some sickness absence is unavoidable and there are some particular and inherent health and safety risks that NHS staff face at work which can lead to sickness absence. And, of course, there are patient safety issues if NHS staff come in to work when they are suffering from illness or injury.

What we found was that NHS trusts have generally improved their policies and procedures for the management of sickness absence cases. But more work is needed to apply good practice consistently. And Sickness absence remains a significant problem, despite the fact that the average rate of sickness absence has reduced to just over 5.3 per cent, compared with the rate of six per cent in 2002-03 that was highlighted in our previous report. This improvement is equivalent to additional staff time in work worth at least £6 million a year; time which can be spent by staff providing services to patients.

**Interviewer :** What are the main recommendations made in the report?

**Gillian Body :** The recommendations in the report have been framed in the context of the plans for the forthcoming reorganisation of the NHS in Wales. We recommend that the new health bodies take the opportunity to embed good practice in the management of sickness absence within their organisational culture, management structures and policies, as well as their daily practice.

Our report recognises that the current 4.2 per cent target for sickness absence set by the Assembly Government is very ambitious; that the basis for the target is unclear; and that most trusts regard it to be an unrealistic ambition. In fact, only two trusts have consistently reported sickness absence rates of below five per cent over recent years. And we recommend that the Assembly Government adopts a smarter approach to target setting that takes account of the individual circumstances and inherited sickness absence rates of each the new NHS bodies.

Other recommendations in our report include the need to develop a common sickness absence management policy for NHS Wales; the production of benchmarking data providing a more detailed analysis of sickness absence trends; the completion of an ongoing review of Occupational Health provision across NHS Wales; and finally the pulling together of existing guidance and good practice on sickness absence management and occupational health and safety issues.

**Interviewer:** So now this report is being published what will be the next steps?

**Gillian Body :**Our report will be considered by the National Assembly's Audit Committee next week, on Wednesday the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, when it takes evidence from senior officials in the Assembly Government's Department for Health and Social Services.