Food Access for Hospital Night Time Workers before and during COVID-19

Report for publication

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October 2021

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Executive summary (1/2)

- Despite obvious challenges (the 'jet-lag feeling'; impact on social life; key amenities being closed at night), there are benefits to working night shifts in hospital – namely, extra pay and a quieter workplace. Workers are more likely to be able to take their break when working nights

- COVID has had a huge impact on hospital workers – it has further exacerbated existing issues with under-staffing and a lack of resources, such as beds
  - Both day and night shifts are much busier than they were before the pandemic
  - Under-staffing is not a bigger issue at night vs. the day; however, the *change* in night shifts has been greater (before the pandemic, night shifts were relatively quieter; now they are much busier)
  - Outside of work, queues and a lack of produce at the shops (during the first lockdown) meant it was harder for NTWs to prepare healthy meals in advance of their shifts

- The stress and resulting issues caused by under-staffing are major contributing factors in the ability of night time workers (NTWs) to make healthy diet choices. Under-staffing is a root cause of other problems, such as a lack of breaks during shifts; low morale among staff; low energy levels

- Generally, it is harder for NTWs to maintain a healthy diet at work (in the hospital) than at home. Additionally, it is harder to maintain a healthy diet when working night shifts in a hospital than day shifts

- This is due to both the **hospital environment** - which enables, even encourages unhealthy good choices - and **other reasons, due to working night shifts more generally:**
  - Breaks for hospital NTWs are often too short to prepare, eat and digest a 'proper' meal (and that is even if there are preparation facilities available, which they are not always). This issue has got worse over the years – as the NHS has got busier, and resources more stretched, it's become harder to take a full break. COVID has made this worse.
  - Unhealthy snacks (from patients and colleagues) are constantly around in hospital and tempting, especially when energy and morale is low. Group takeaways or bringing in chocolate is part of the staff camaraderie, and a way of 'treating yourself' for getting through a stressful shift.
  - The length of hospital shifts – 12 hours – means there is not always time for respondents to sleep and prepare food before they have to travel back into work. Instead, they have to prepare for the whole week on their day off – which isn't always practical. Missing this one day of preparation may lead to poor eating for the next few working days, as it means relying on the food available at the hospital. This tends to be unhealthy (including canteen food, although this varies by hospital)
  - Shift work means it is hard to stick to a regular slot each week for exercising

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Executive summary (2/2)

- However, COVID brought some temporary improvements to the food offer in hospitals:
  - In some cases, local businesses have been providing free food for staff. How healthy this is varies (some mentioned salads; others, Dominoes)
  - In many hospitals, the canteen was open at night – although this does not necessarily offer healthy food

- Due to the hospital environment, the ability to make healthy food choices relies on the individual's ability to, firstly, exercise will-power, and secondly, prepare healthy food at home. This is a lot easier for those with more free time (without caring responsibilities, for example)

- Responses to incentives to facilitate healthy eating were muted – because such incentives do not tackle root causes (under-staffing). They are also at risk of being viewed as 'patronising'
  - Protecting breaks would potentially make the most difference to the ability to maintain a healthy diet – but this would be difficult to enforce in practice
  - Providing better preparation/eating facilities relies on people bringing in their own healthy food (does not overcome a lack of time / inclination)

- Overall, despite issues with diet/lifestyle, nursing is still considered an incredibly rewarding job

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Research objectives
This research sought to understand:

1. The positives and negatives of working at night in a hospital

2. Barriers to accessing healthy food for night time health workers, both in general and in the workplace
   - What role does the location of hospital / local high street play?

3. The impact a lack of available healthy food has on participants
   - Both the short- and long-term impact of a poor food offer

4. The most effective interventions to support those who work at night, both in hospital and more generally

5. Has participants' ability to access healthy food changed over time? (Especially for those who have served in the NHS for a number of years)

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Sample and methodology

- Prior to interviews, participants were asked to complete an **online diary** for five working days, stating:
    - What they ate on their shift that day (including a photo of their food if possible)
    - If they bought their food from home, or at the hospital
    - If they were able to take a full / partial / no break

- x17 45m **phone interviews**, conducted during April and May 2020

- Sample contained a mix of age, ethnicity, family status, and gender

- Other recruitment criteria:
    - **Profession**: roughly one third of the sample were qualified nurses (any level of seniority); one third student nurses; one third hospital cleaners
    - **Location of workplace** (hospital): half worked in inner Londoner hospitals, half in outer
    - Mix of **length of time working in NHS/hospital**

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Positives and negatives of working at night in a hospital

Healthcare is already a challenging work environment. Existing issues have been exacerbated by COVID

- The vast majority mentioned their jobs were challenging due to **a lack of resources / staff** within the NHS. These existing stresses have been exacerbated by COVID:
  - Nurses work long hours (often 12 hour shifts). Having to work unpaid overtime is common, when shifts run over or breaks cannot be taken as the ward is too busy
  - There is a lack of beds. Nurses have to keep patients moving out of the hospital, adding to stress
  - There is acknowledgement both under-staffing and a lack of resources **have got worse over time** (from those who have worked in the NHS for 10+ years)
- COVID meant healthcare workers may be **redeployed** from their usual role (e.g. one outpatient nurse was now working on wards). Redeployed staff did not always feel they had the right skills or training for their new roles – rather, they 'had been thrown in at the deep end'.

That said, nurses were generally positive about their jobs – treating patients is considered so rewarding as to largely outweigh the negatives.

Challenges are probably the hours… I don't think I've got out on time once in the last month. Usually a shift is 12 hours, but at the minute it's 13, 13 and a half maybe?
A and E Nurse, aged 34

I don't usually work on a ward, I'm more outpatients, so I'm office-based … I haven't really got any intensive care experience, so I'd rather help out on the other general wards, rather than on ITU, but that might change in the next week or so, who knows.
Specialist Nurse, aged 29

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COVID means resources are extremely stretched. Nurses are looking after more, and sicker, patients

We're at **double or triple the normal number of patients in intensive care**. The staffing is not enough, so they retrained the normal ward nurses to help us out, and it means that every trained ICU staff [is] looking after a group of nurses and three to four patients on their shift. Whereas normally you only look after yourself and one patient. **And now you have to supervise non-trained staff and three or more sick patients, who could be a lot sicker than a regular ICU patient.**

ICU Nurse, aged 30

There are obvious challenges to night shifts – but extra pay and a quieter workplace provide incentives

Challenges

- Almost all mentioned the 'jet-lag feeling' that comes after working night shifts (and eats into your own down-time). Because of this, there is a preference for doing several night shifts together, to make the jet-lag 'worth' it.

- Night work has an impact on workers' social lives as well – either as they are working whilst their friends are free, or they feel too tired to see friends. Practically speaking, it is harder to run errands as facilities such as the shops or bank may be closed by the time workers are awake

But the majority recognise that night shifts are just 'part of the job' – and that there are benefits:

- The pay is higher (than day shifts)

- The working environment is quieter. Patients tend to be asleep and there are no family visits – therefore, staff **tend to be more able to take breaks** than in the day
    - Although during COVID there was not much difference in busyness between day and night shifts

- Staff are free during the day before and the day after the night shift. Depending on tiredness, they can use this time for 'life admin' (although not to socialise, as others tend to be at work)

> It takes me a week to recover from doing a few nights, just to feel back to normal.
> *A and E Nurse, aged 34*

> [When working nights] you can enjoy your family during the day, and then when they're asleep, that's when I'm out, so I'm not really missing a lot at home
> *Cleaner (agency), aged 48*

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COVID has impacted hospital workers, both in and out of the workplace – which has repercussions for their diets

Generally:

- COVID has increased the number of night shifts available, due to both higher numbers of patients and lower numbers of available staff (due to isolation / staff sickness). Individuals are both volunteering to do more night shifts, and being asked

- Workloads in general are higher – again, due to both staff shortages (COVID absences and Brexit) and greater numbers of patients

In terms of diet:

- Wearing PPE is unpleasant and difficult to take on and off. Removing PPE cuts into break times/how much time staff have to eat, which in turn impacts what food can be eaten

- Eating healthily whilst working night shifts requires a certain amount of self-control – it's harder to implement this when tired or stressed from work

Outside the hospital
- Queues and a lack of produce at the shops mean it is hard to prepare healthy meals in advance. Going shopping is unappealing after a night shift

- More snacks are being brought in (both healthy and unhealthy), by staff, patients' families and donations from local food companies

I don't think it would even be that difficult [to eat healthily at work], it's just how badly I want to do it… In the day time [I can't go shopping because] I'm usually asleep from my night shifts. When I do go, the queues are so long now, I just don't want to go.
Cleaner (agency), aged 34

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Access to food during night shifts

In general, respondents' diets are worse at work than at home… (1/2)

This is due to several reasons.

Firstly, the length of shifts. Both day and night shifts are long – 12 hours – meaning there **may not be enough time** for respondents to sleep and prepare food before they have to travel back into work (or they are too tired to prepare food). Instead, they have to prepare for the whole week on their day off – which isn't always practical. Missing this one day of preparation may lead to poor eating for the next few working days. Preparation is key, as even when staff *are* able to shop on their break, they are usually doing so whilst hungry and are therefore more likely to impulse buy unhealthy food

I'll just grab whatever's there – I know it's not healthy but it's convenient. If I'm in theatre, and I've got one case after another, I don't always have the time to go and heat up a meal or go and eat a salad, so I'll just quickly eat some cookies and have a coffee.
Senior Nurse, aged 50

Secondly, a lack of time to prepare food to bring in means relying on the food available at the hospital. This tends to be unhealthy: it is usually either coffee shop snacks or stodgy canteen food (although the quality of the canteen food varies widely between hospitals). In terms of shops: even if these are open, the opportunities for staff to leave the hospital whilst on breaks are limited (their breaks too short and the hospital too far away from a decent food offer). Sometimes the hospital is so large it is even too far for staff to walk to the canteen and back within their allocated break time.

My home food is definitely healthier, because I know what's going in there… [When I shop on my break] I impulse buy most of the time. The worst time to shop is when I'm hungry as well. I'm rubbish when I'm hungry, literally it's just like, "I want this, I want that, I want that."
Cleaner (agency), aged 32

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In general, respondents' diets are worse at work than at home… (2/2)

Thirdly, breaks are too short to prepare, eat and digest a 'proper' meal (and that is even if there are preparation facilities available, which they are not always). This issue has got worse over the years – as the NHS has got busier, and resources more stretched, it's become harder to take a full break.

Finally, unhealthy snacks (from patients and colleagues) are constantly around and tempting, especially when morale is low. Group takeaways or bringing in chocolate is part of the staff camaraderie, and a way of 'treating yourself' for getting through a stressful shift. 'Grabbing what's there' is very common behaviour, especially when in need of a quick energy boost. Many said they would be tired and hungry from being on their feet all day, despite actually burning relatively little energy.

Yes, over the years it has definitely become harder [to take breaks], because it's just got busier, it's just so busy compared to like, nearly 20 years ago.
Nurse, aged 40

Grabbing some chocolate is easier than sitting down and having a proper meal.
ICU Nurse, aged 30

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...And diet suffers further on night shifts

As well as those mentioned previously, night shifts pose additional issues:

1. The shops / canteen tend not to be open, so in order to eat healthily, **preparation is key** (as discussed, this is problematic). Without food prepared at home, staff tend to on takeaways or snacks available at the hospital

2. Whilst night shifts mean staff are more likely to be able to take breaks, they tend to **crave** different types of food at night. This is usually something **small and sugary** for the energy boost (biscuits are popular) – rather than a heavy meal

3. The group mentality of 'let's treat ourselves' is **greater at night**

A lot of the time, if there's a group of us that haven't brought food into work, we're like, we could order take-away or we'll have what's in work, and yes, it's generally unhealthy.
A and E Nurse, aged 34

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Hospitals facilitate unhealthy, rather than healthy, food choices

The hospital set-up enables, even encourages, unhealthy food choices. As well as the constant supply of unhealthy snacks, there is also a lack of healthy food for sale.

The ability to make healthy food choices falls to the individual. It relies on their ability to, firstly, exercise will-power, and secondly, prepare healthy food at home. *This is a lot easier for those with more free time (without caring responsibilities, for example).*

A lot of the time there is a lot of rubbish food floating around, obviously you get [food] gifts and stuff from families, but I personally am quite strict with making sure that I eat healthily… I do a lot of food prep to make sure that I am actually taking a decent meal into work.
Specialist Nurse, aged 29 (no caring responsibilities outside work)

If I'm cooking for the kids, and I don't particularly want to eat a big meal, sometimes by the time I've done that, it's time for me to leave. So that's when I'd have to buy something on the way into work or at work.
Cleaner, aged 48

COVID has meant many challenges, but also a few opportunities, for eating healthily

Challenges to maintaining a healthy diet, due to COVID:

- **Staff are less likely to be able to take breaks**, even during night shifts (due to staff shortages). In some cases, staff said they were more likely to *not* take break than take one. This means that they are either not eating, or grabbing whatever food they can

- Staff breaks are further shortened by having to remove PPE

- **Infection control means no food – *or water* – on the ward.** In some cases, staff could not drink for hours on their shift

- **Staff are unlikely to be able to leave the hospital during their breaks** – both due to the short length of their breaks and infection control. This means the food offer is limited to what staff have bought in / what is available in hospital canteen (which is not necessarily healthy)

However, COVID has brought about some improvements:

- Some mentioned that **local businesses have been providing free food for staff**. How healthy this is varies (some mentioned salads; others, Dominoes)

- In many hospitals, the **canteen is now open** at night – although this does not necessarily offer healthy food

[During COVID, we're working with] 60% less staff, and an increase in the patients' care level, and you just can't even get a sip of water for hours, because once you're in, you're in, and there is nothing – you're not allowed to touch your face, nothing is going in your mouth.
Senior Nurse, aged 40

I'm not a snacker… but because of Covid, there's a bunch of snacks here and I've found myself snacking for the first time.
Student Nurse, aged 32

Impact of a poor food offer

The negative impact of night shifts is readily recognised; the impact of the food offer is not

The majority of respondents did not *spontaneously* consider the potential impact (either short- or long-term) of a poor food offer on their health or lifestyle.

Whilst there is widespread acknowledgment amongst NTWs that night shifts generally result in a 'jet-lagged' feeling, **a poor diet is not usually considered as a contributing factor to this** (at least not spontaneously).

That said, **when questioned the majority recognised that eating a poor diet whilst working nights had a resulting impact on their life outside work**. This was variously due to: a lack of energy on their days off; diet affecting their sleep; weight gain.

Those who have experienced weight gain as a result of their diet at work are more likely to recognise the impact of a poor food offer on their life (and health) outside of work.

If I'm not able to eat healthily at work, when I'm off I definitely feel the impact of that… When I want to do things on my days off, and I think, "Oh god, I haven't got the energy to do it, probably because I've not eaten very well this week."
A and E Nurse, aged 34

Probably I put more weight on because of the way I eat at work… I think it impacts my health more than I like to admit.
Intensive Care Nurse, aged 30

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More broadly, shift work means it is harder to stick to healthy routine

Working nights has an impact on workers ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle *outside* of work.

Many mentioned feeling 'too tired' to exercise after working a 12 hour shift (and being on their feet for the majority of that time).

Staff recognise that is it hard for them to maintain a healthy diet whilst working at the hospital, due to reasons already mentioned. This then impacts on their ability / motivation to maintain a healthy diet 'routine' outside of work. It is both difficult to stick to an eating regime when working shifts, and easy to be de-motivated if you feel your efforts are being derailed at work.

Practically, shift work means it is hard to stick to a regular slot each week for exercising or attending weight-loss groups

Everyone is always at Slimming World, or doing something like that… Generally a lot of people are overweight, once they reach their mid-thirties nursing, their metabolism starts to go down, and you're craving more rubbish to get through the days, and you're not going to regular exercise classes, because you can't; there's no point in paying for a regular thing when you can't get there. It's a waste of money. *Nurse, aged 40*

However, respondents would still go into nursing, despite knowing the challenges it poses to diet

For the majority, patient interaction is considered incredibly rewarding and the reason why they went into their work. For the most part, this outweighs issues with pay and shift-work (which are themselves **considered bigger issues than diet**)

Eating a poor diet does, however, impact on the extent to which respondents are able to *enjoy* their job. There is some awareness that it is 'pushing' them into an unhealthy lifestyle or causing them to gain weight.

There is also a perception amongst respondents that night-shift workers are not particularly valued. Whilst the high workload and perceived low pay are the main reasons for this view, the canteen / shops being closed and a lack of facilities within the staff rooms compounds this feeling of being under-appreciated.

Sometimes, yes [diet impacts my enjoyment of the job], because I just always, I'm not going to lie, it's always in the back of my head that I'm not eating healthily.
Nurse, aged 32

I don't regret my decision [to train as a nurse, despite challenges]. What I enjoy is helping and meeting different people from all different walks of life.
Student Nurse, aged 32

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Interventions to support access to healthy food during night-shifts

When asked about possible changes to facilitate healthy eating, responses were muted

The overall attitude amongst NTWs is one of, 'this is how it is'. Many are jaded and overworked. There is recognition by long-serving staff that issues have got worse over time.

Staff are facing bigger issues than a lack of healthy food – namely under-staffing and a lack of resources (leading to workplace stress); perceived low pay.

Perhaps because of these greater challenges, changes concerning diet do not seem to have been considered spontaneously by NTWs.

When questioned about potential initiatives, some felt that the hospital is not responsible for the diets of individuals, and that their diet is their decision (and responsibility). Any potential initiatives must be extremely careful not to appear infantilising or overly-prescriptive.

Fundamentally, the hospital is to look after people who are unwell. So, in terms of what we're eating, I feel like that's more of a personal thing… I feel like there is probably a way that I can rein in my diet and make it better, but I know that if I'm constantly working or excessively working I won't [be healthy], I know that's probably my own fault.
Nurse, aged 32

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Taking into account the barriers to accessing healthy food at night, what can the hospital do?

Outside hospital control / budget

Staffing – **see next slide**

We **crave** different food at night (quick energy boost; not large meals), which is more likely to be unhealthy

Individual's attitude to preparing food in advance (and the time they have to do this)

Requires cultural shift

Discourage patients and staff from bringing in **unhealthy snacks / takeaways** (hospitals as 'healthy eating zones'). **How else can camaraderie be encouraged without food?**

Consider the **length of night shifts / breaks**. Would decreasing length of shift mean individual has more time to **prepare** for the next shift? Would increasing or **protecting breaks** mean more time to prepare / eat healthily? (Aside from protecting breaks, **changes would impact pay**)
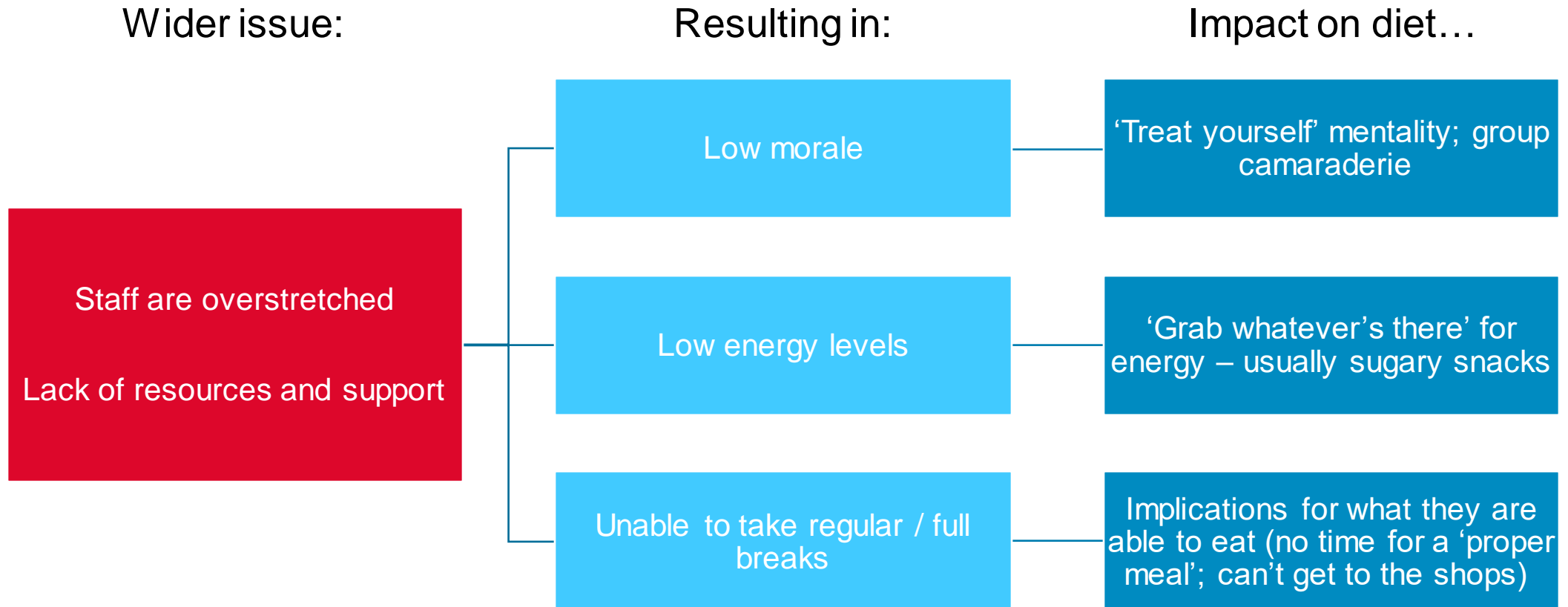
Quick wins

Increasing access to healthy food at night by **extending opening times** of shops and canteen

Improving **offer and affordability** of healthy food in canteen / providing free snacks. **Take advantage of 'grabbing' mentality!**

Providing **spaces** for staff to **sleep and to prepare** healthy food during night shifts *(extent of impact is questionable…)*

The lack of resources / staff in hospital is a **major factor** in the ability of NTWs to make healthy diet choices

Wider issue:

Resulting in:

Impact on diet…

Staff are overstretched

Lack of resources and support

Low morale

Low energy levels

Unable to take regular / full breaks

'Treat yourself' mentality; group camaraderie

'Grab whatever's there' for energy – usually sugary snacks

Implications for what they are able to eat (no time for a 'proper meal'; can't get to the shops)

Protecting breaks would make the most difference – but is difficult in practice

Protecting breaks would make the most difference (not increasing them, which would decrease pay) in enabling staff to have a healthier diet. However, doing this would require both a cultural shift and more staffing, to create a situation in which it's acceptable to take your full break.

Protected breaks would allow staff to sit down / heat up food and have a 'proper meal', rather than grab snacks. Currently, the ability to take breaks differs by hospital / ward (in ICU, breaks are protected). However, respondents recognise that protected breaks are just not possible due to emergencies when all staff are required.

Another option is opening the canteen at night – and crucially, stocking with healthy options. However, this depends on staff having time in their breaks to visit the canteen and having money to spend at the canteen.

Better preparation / eating facilities were also considered. Implementing these would still require people to bring in their own food: it does not overcome the major issue of a lack of time / inclination for preparing food at home.

> It would be really good if we could all get our full breaks… But I just know it's the culture [not to]… You get judged a bit by the other nurses if you take your full break
> *Student Nurse, aged 32*

> Preparation facilities are a nice idea, but given the time restrictions we have, I don't think it would make a lot of difference. It would make more difference for a consultant, who's not actively looking after patients and can have as long a break as they want. But not for nursing staff.
> *ICU Nurse, aged 30*

Conclusion

Conclusion

It is harder to maintain a healthy diet when working night shifts in a hospital than day shifts.

This is due to both the **hospital environment**:

- High incidence of under-staffing and workplace stress. Unhealthy 'treat' food is one way for staff to bond / raise morale
- Staff not having long enough breaks to prepare and digest a healthy meal – instead grabbing convenience food
- Canteen / shops not being open. This does not seem to be impacted by hospital location – even if facilities are open, workers tend not to have enough time to go to these
- Lack of spaces to prepare / eat a proper meal

And **other reasons, due to working night shifts more generally**:

- Our bodies crave different types of food (more likely to be 'unhealthy') at night
- Night work leaves you feeling tired and with a lack of energy to prepare healthy food when you arrive home
- Practically, it is difficult to stick to a healthy routine or attend regular exercise / weight loss groups if working shifts

That said, it is not impossible for NTWs to maintain a healthy diet/lifestyle – but does require organisation and time on behalf of the individual (to plan and prepare food). It is therefore likely easier for those without major responsibilities (e.g. caring responsibilities) outside of work.

Of the possible interventions to improve the ability of hospital NTWs to maintain a healthy lifestyle at work, protecting breaks would make the most difference in contributing to a healthy workplace environment – but is difficult to enforce in practice, especially given under-staffing within hospitals.

Ultimately, however, hospital NTWs are facing bigger issues that their ability to maintain a healthy diet – namely, stress caused by under-staffing and a lack of resources. These are the issues that NTW workers would like to see tackled, and these are the issues which contribute to an workplace environment that encourages unhealthy eating.

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