

SHIFTING HABITS IN THE POLICE

Anna Earl and Chief Inspector Dr Yvonne Taylor talk to *Hatty Willmoth* about improving police wellbeing with nutrition

Police work can be tough. Different roles bring different challenges, but staff often face long shifts at unsociable hours, and deal with stressful and upsetting situations.

The National Police Wellbeing Service (NPWS) aims to tackle the physical and emotional toll that all this can take, supporting the wellbeing of police officers and staff across England and Wales. Last November, it launched a nutrition programme led by Anna Earl.

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Meet Anna Earl

Earl left the police force nine years ago. While studying with the Institute for Optimum Nutrition, changes she saw in her own health inspired a total career switch. Now, Earl is a nutritional therapy practitioner who specialises in supporting shift workers.

"[I] have reversed all my health symptoms that I had while being a police officer," she says. "So I've come off my asthma medication, which I was on for 30 years. I don't get gut symptoms. I don't have PMS [premenstrual syndrome] every month anymore. And the only change really — apart from my [work] hours — was dietary."

And Earl has now gone back to working with the police — this time developing resources and leading webinars on nutrition for the NPWS.

She says: "I want to spread that word out: you don't have to live with all these different aches and pains and niggles and symptoms. And it's not rocket science, it's just about changing habits gradually."



Anna Earl

IN BRIEF

- Many of the UK's police may go on to retire with chronic disease.
- Former police officer Anna Earl is developing a nutrition programme to support police forces in England and Wales, collaborating with Chief Inspector Dr Yvonne Taylor.
- It is hoped that roll-out of the programme will have a wide-reaching impact in improving police health.

Meet Yvonne Taylor

Overseeing much of what the NPWS does from a police perspective is Chief Inspector Dr Yvonne Taylor. As the Oscar Kilo Life Lead, she's in charge of all the NPWS's sleep and fatigue projects.

"I've got nearly 27 years as a police officer," she says. "I've worked in both North Yorkshire and West Yorkshire Police, but I spent a lot of time in roads policing investigating serious and fatal collisions, looking at reasons behind that — drink and drug driving; that kind of thing."

"I was particularly interested in understanding more about the reasons for collisions. I started studying shift work and driver fatigue in policing,

and I did my PhD in that. That's how I got into the sleep and fatigue field, and I joined National Police Wellbeing. It's just brilliant that it's extended into nutrition and physical health because it's all so deeply intertwined."

National Police Wellbeing Service

There has been some form of police wellbeing service for a while, says Taylor, but the NPWS in its current form has only existed since 2019. The work that it does is directed by responses to annual wellbeing surveys.

"Everything that we do with National Police Wellbeing is evidence-based," says Taylor. "We will look for the best evidence we can find internationally; if there isn't something specific for policing, and more so for policing in the UK, then we will commission research and work with experts to try and bring in the services that we need."

There are many different projects ongoing or about to be started, Taylor says, on all manner of topics, and available for police staff, their families, retirees and leavers.

Issues in the police force

And it seems these projects are seriously needed. Earl says: "I worked on a major investigations team where

Dr Yvonne Taylor



a lot of seasoned detectives retired from that team, and many of them did not retire well. So many of them are on a whole cocktail of prescription drugs to get them through each day, and drugs to stop the side effects of other drugs.

“I just think that’s so sad, that they’d given their whole 30-year career to this amazing job, and were then retiring with so many aches and pains and issues — diabetes, high blood pressure, and so on... [We’re] trying to get the message across that it doesn’t have to be like that.

“I’m getting questionnaires back from officers now who are being so open and honest about their issues, their struggles, their health symptoms, and it makes me want to cry, because they’re doing such an amazing job, working with really traumatic situations every day. I just think we should be able to throw resources at them to support them. They should be celebrated.”

Addressing the challenges of shifts
Problematic shift patterns have a lot to

answer for, especially when it means people are working — and eating — at night. Earl says this can have adverse effects on health and wellbeing.

“Having that disruption to the natural body clock means that certain hormones are triggered and suppressed at the wrong time of day for you,” she says. “So if you’re trying to digest a meal at three o’clock in the morning, all of your digestive hormones are also going to sleep; they won’t stimulate the same kinds of digestive juices [that they would during the day].

“Also, it’s much more likely that when you’re eating at that time of night, you’re going to be storing your food as fat, rather than your metabolism being able to burn it more effectively.

“You also may not break down the food properly, so it’s very common to have a lot of gastrointestinal issues as a shift worker — poor digestion. That might then have the knock-on effect of energy slumps and low mood and weight gain.”

Earl says that, from the most recent

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survey, the two areas where nutrition can be most impactful are in combating fatigue and supporting emotional wellbeing. “We’re looking to have more of a blood sugar balance, so we’re not having spikes and troughs of energy. And then there’s the food for mood side. That’s how food can support your hormones, whether that’s for women on a monthly cycle, or whether it’s anyone feeling worried and anxious and stressed.”

Implementing systemic change

Making changes across the entire police force will be difficult, they both say, because of how varied it is. There are 43 Home Office forces, Taylor says, and then there are those in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as Special Forces such as the British Transport Police. “Each of these forces has their own leadership team, and they’re all run slightly differently.”

Earl adds: “You’ve got such a wide scope. There’s the call centre staff that are fairly tied to their desks for most of their shift, so you’ve got the sedentary issue there, versus the officers that never come back to the station but spend their whole shift out flying from job to job in their police car.”

Ultimately, they agree, success will depend on the engagement of staff: “a partnership,” Taylor says, “between the organisation and the individuals.”

Hopes for the future

Taylor and Earl are hopeful that their work will have a positive impact on people’s lives; Earl is calling for “a huge cultural shift”.

“We hope that it might reduce sickness,” she says. “That’s very difficult to prove, but that’s an aim; by fuelling people well, they feel more able to come into work every day, which means that resourcing benefits.

“And as we start very small, my dream is that we have this snowball effect so that, ultimately, we can make some really big, effective changes on a much wider scale — but that’s probably a few years down the line.”

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To find out more about the National Police Wellbeing Service: www.oscarkilo.org.uk