

A Study of Certified Sickness

Absence among women
in industry

by
S. Wynnatt etc.



MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

**INDUSTRIAL HEALTH RESEARCH BOARD
REPORT No. 86**

**A STUDY OF CERTIFIED SICKNESS
ABSENCE AMONG WOMEN
IN INDUSTRY**

by

S. WYATT

(assisted by R. Marriott, W. M. Dawson, Norah M. Davis,
D. E. R. Hughes and F. G. L. Stock)

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SICKNESS ABSENCE AMONG WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

SICKNESS ABSENCE

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(Revised 1942)

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A STUDY OF CERTIFIED SICKNESS ABSENCE AMONG WOMEN IN INDUSTRY

PREFACE

During the war, good health in industrial workers is of urgent practical significance, since ill-health leads to absence or lowered efficiency, and thus to decreased production. Until recently, the problems of health and disease in women have attracted less interest and attention than other, less important, causes of absence from work. There appears to be a tendency to regard ill-health which cannot be attributed to the nature of the work as unavoidable, although there is evidence that some factories have a considerably higher rate of sickness absence than others engaged on similar work.

There can be little doubt that the wartime extension of industrial medical and personnel services, and also of canteens and hostels, has done much to prevent illness, but scientific evidence of the effects of environmental and other factors on health is lacking. The Industrial Health Research Board decided, therefore, that there was a need for a detailed inquiry into the nature, distribution and causes of sickness absence, and this report presents some of their findings on the subject.

An understanding of the scope and limitations of this report is desirable. The report is, in the main, a statistical study of the records of the sickness absence of some 20,000 women. At present, it is unfortunately not possible to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the health of women workers as a whole, or even of women in any particular industry, since, in many organisations, records of sickness absence are inadequate or not comparable. Further, this report is confined to a discussion of those factors which are suitable for quantitative analysis, such as the types of disease, the amount and distribution of sickness absence, and the age, length of service and civil state of the women concerned. It was thought that a study of measurable factors should precede any inquiry into the more complex, and often obscure, relationship between health and working conditions, or between physical health and the mind.

The investigation was completed before "The Recording of Sickness Absence in Industry" (*Industrial Health Research Board Report No. 85*) was published, and the recommendations contained therein were, therefore, not available. The procedure adopted in the present investigation differs in some respects from that suggested in Report No. 85. The classification of disease, and the method of reckoning the length of absences, are not quite the same. There is reason to believe, however, that the procedure recommended in Report No. 85 could be used in most establishments, especially after the war, when conditions are likely to be more uniform and stable.

This report on sickness absence at a certain stage in the war should be useful for comparative and historical purposes, and also as an indication of the value and methods of treatment of sickness records. Sickness records serve as an index to the state of health of individuals and of groups of workers, either in the same or in different industries; and they frequently draw attention to unsuspected factors that impede progress and undermine fitness for work. A high sickness rate is serious not only because it means absence from work, associated with human suffering and loss of production, but also because it is likely to be the result of some general condition affecting all workers in

different degrees, implying therefore a more widespread ill-health than is shown by absence records alone. Thus general measures which reduce sickness absence will probably result also in improved health and efficiency among all workers in the group. In addition to such general measures, special attention to a comparatively small number of women should lead to a considerable decrease in the amount of time lost through illness. This investigation, although limited to a study of a period of six months only, indicates that in war, as in peace, a minority of the workers are particularly liable to sickness absence.

INDUSTRIAL HEALTH RESEARCH BOARD OF THE
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20th December, 1944

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY	4
II. RESULTS OBTAINED:—	
A. Amount of sickness absence	5
(i) The frequency of sickness absence	7
(ii) Number of days of sickness	11
(iii) Length of absences	12
(iv) Distribution of sickness absence	13
(v) Long sickness absences	14
(vi) Number discharged because of ill-health	15
B. Sickness absence and age	16
(i) Number of absences	17
(ii) Number of days of sickness	19
(iii) Length of absences	19
(iv) Type of sickness	20
(v) Number discharged because of ill-health	22
C. Sickness absence and length of service	22
(i) Number and length of absences and number of days of sickness	22
(ii) Type of sickness	25
(iii) Number discharged because of ill-health	25
D. Age, length of service and sickness absence	26
(i) Distribution of workers	26
(ii) Number of absences	26
(iii) Number of days of sickness	27
(iv) Length of absences	27
E. Miscellaneous factors	28
(i) Type of work	28
(ii) Shift systems	29
III. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	30
(i) Amount of sickness absence	30
(ii) Sickness absence and age	32
(iii) Sickness absence and length of service	33
(iv) General	34
IV. CONCLUSIONS	34