**Equality Diversity and Inclusion Conference 2016**

**Stream 6 – Hidden Inequalities in the Workplace: Dignity and Wellbeing**

**Being Coeliac: Hidden Inequalities in the Workplace**

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**Abstract**

**Food is an integral part of organisational life, it is used as a morale booster, a reward, as a means to build team spirit, and a conduit for networking. It is such a central aspect of our working lives that for most, it is taken for granted. However, for employees who suffer from coeliac disease, the social, psychological and symbolic role of food can cause isolation and exclusion from organisational settings. As a result, employees with coeliac disease may experience discriminatory practices which impact on their equal opportunities and dignity within the workplace. The extent of the exclusion and discrimination experienced by sufferers from employers and/or colleagues or its impact upon wellbeing at work is unknown as there is a dearth of knowledge about the management of coeliac disease in the workplace and whether employees have any rights or any legal responsibilities or moral obligations on the part of employers. This exploratory study aims to address this gap by identifying what levels of awareness exist among employers and human resource professionals; the extent of discrimination experienced by employees with coeliac disease and what, if any, areas of good practice exist which assist the management of the condition.**

**Identifying, stating and justifying the ‘problem’:**

The main objective of the project is to examine the treatment of employees with coeliac disease (CD) in the workplace. From a working population of 31 million people (Source: Office of National Statistics Labour Market Statistics, August 2015) and current estimates by Coeliac UK that CD affects 1 in 100, we can extrapolate that around 310,000 workers have CD. While the physical and emotional effects of CD and their impact on the sufferer have to some extent been documented in terms of the psychosocial aspects (Ford, Howard and Oyebode, 2012), little is known about how sufferers manage in the workplace. Many sufferers have expressed feelings of anxiety and depression as a result of perceived exclusion from social settings as a result of their diagnosis (Black and Orfila, 2011). Research has, to date, failed to explore the emotional impact of diagnosis on sufferers’ working lives. Secondly, food has a significant impact in working lives, as it plays a significant role in organisational culture; it is used as a morale-booster, a form of reward or celebration, a means to build team working, and as a way to network (Thompson and Hassenkamp, 2008). For coeliac sufferers, these employer’s actions have the potential to result in isolation and exclusion, impacting on personal and working lives. Most significantly, there is evidence that the law does not provide adequate protection for coeliacs in the workplace with resulting social isolation, emotional impact and costs. Therefore, research on these areas is essential to raise awareness to policy makers and employers. Although awareness of dietary requirements is on the increase, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of employers about both the condition and whether they have any role to play in supporting the sufferer in its management. Therefore, the following objectives will be addressed in the research:

* To analyse the legal position regarding coeliac people at work
* To evidence the impact of discrimination practices in workplace on coeliac people.

The following research questions will be addressed in the research:

* 1. ***Does the law adequately protect coeliac people in the workplace?***

As the disease is managed via adherence to the gluten free diet, for which 60% of coeliacs report experiencing some difficulty in maintaining (Araújo and Araújo, 2012), there are evident difficulties in workplace provision whether through lack of facilities to buy or store home-prepared food. This issue is compounded by the fact that coeliac disease is not specifically considered a disability or ‘chronic long term condition’ under the Equalities Act (2010) which would require employers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to accommodate the sufferer. There is a grey area as to what, if any, are the employers’ obligations and what may be reasonable for employees to expect in terms of equal treatment and consideration for their dignity at work.

Despite a shift in thinking, the current legislative framework has achieved little change in improving organisational justice (Ahmed, 2007). Legislation plays a key role for tackling unfair discrimination and deliver the progress that is needed to create an inclusive society (Özbilgin et al., 2008). However, compliance to legislation seems to be ineffective in eliminating discrimination amongst CD sufferers. Physical and emotional effects have not been fully addressed at organisational level and anecdotal evidence obtained from social media CD support groups leads to the argument that current management practices are not in line with the principles and perspective of diversity. Organisations have now moral and strategic obligations to develop explicit strategies to valuing individual differences at organisational level rather than following a uniform regulatory approach (CIPD, 2012).

* 1. ***What discriminatory practices exist and what is their impact?***

Lee et al. (2012) in their longitudinal quality of life study of living with CD shows that while the impact on family, dining out and travel diminishes as time following diagnosis passes, the effect on work remains the same whether the diagnosis is recent or more than 10 years prior. This is in line with Black and Orfila’s (2011) findings which reported feelings of anxiety and depression due to exclusion in social settings due to the difficulty of adhering to the Gluten Free diet. Much discrimination is unintentional and arises from ignorance or lack of understanding by the non-coeliac. It is further compounded by silence or resentment by the ‘involved’ party. Indirect discrimination occurs if a ‘provision, criterion or practice’ is imposed which members of one group are much less likely to be able to comply with, and which is not justified by the requirements of the job.

It is important to consider the emotional implications of being excluded from social events where food has a social, psychological and symbolic dimension. Discrimination against coeliac sufferers in the workplace arises from being excluded from joining in corporate hospitality because of a lack of gluten free options; of the condition being referred to as an ‘eating disorder’; or, of being told to take their own food as they were considered ‘too difficult’ to cater for and the like. This clearly impacts upon the employee’s equal opportunities as well as their dignity in the workplace. In addition, food and eating are symbolic in the workplace as they represent celebrations of success, cement team ‘togetherness’ and cohesiveness (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013), and other organisational ‘rituals’ (Flores-Pereira, Davel and Cavedon, 2008), Rosen (1985) was among the first to acknowledge the symbolism of organisational celebrations featuring eating. More recently Sturdy, Schwartz and Spicer (2006) identified the business dinner “as a liminal space between work and private spheres” (Briner and Sturdy, 2008:907) thus providing us with a linkage between an employers’ obligations to the coeliac employee.

Cunha, Cabral-Cardoso and Clegg (2008) conceptualise food within organisations in four ways: food as need, social interaction, culture and as a metaphor – providing a framework to examine the needs of the coeliac in the workplace. Firstly, food as need refers to meal breaks and the availability of gluten-free food or the facilities to safely store and reheat food from home. Secondly, food as social interaction whether it be business-related entertaining, networking opportunities or the exchange of news and knowledge at the coffee machine. Thirdly, the cultural aspects of food at work in terms of cakes for celebrations, birthdays for example or food to symbolise religious festivals, or food as reward; food as metaphor is used by Cunha *et al.* (2008) in a number of ways – to explain the organisation as a consumer of worker flesh or to reflect the organisation’s ‘health’ whether it be anorexic or over-weight to name two.

Expanding the theme of the organisation (employer) as a consumer of worker flesh then that highlights the need for the worker to be healthy in order to provide adequate nutrition – hence our argument for the need for employers to consider the needs of their coeliac employees. In order to determine what is known about the management of the condition in the workplace we conducted a search of the academic literature using a range of keyword terms including ‘coeliac’, celiac (in order to ascertain if work had been carried out in the United States) and ‘employment’ which yielded no results; likewise a search of the factsheets, reports and on-line discussion/advice forums offered by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), the professional body for human resource managers, again produced no results. While Coeliac UK provides a wide and informative range of guidance and advice covering school meals, eating out and holidaying abroad once more there is no specific guidance for either the coeliac employee or his/her employer.

Whilst employers have a ‘duty of care’ towards the health and wellbeing of their employees, there are also organisational benefits in providing support. A survey by Coeliac UK (2006) found that pre-diagnosed suffers took an average of 21.4 days sick (with this dropping by 3.6 days after diagnosis). By providing organisational support for sufferers, the number of sick days could be dramatically reduced. In addition, research has highlighted that employees who perceive their organisation values their contribution and supports their wellbeing are more likely to display positive employee attitudes and behaviours (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Dulac et al., 2008) and have lower levels of intentions to leave (Wayne et al., 1997). Employees who perceive their organisation provides a lack of social support are more likely to become disengaged with their work (Demerouti et al., 2001) and create the sense of unfairness in the workplace (Griffiths, 2008).

Although it is discriminatory for an employer to treat a coeliac differently from other employees in the UK, the onus is on the employee to prove that they have been treated unfairly and are left to pursue it via an employment tribunal (Griffiths, 2008). This is costly in both financial and emotional terms and the reality is likely to be that employees tend not to take action. Therefore, the emotional and social dimensions of unfair treatment might encourage employers to make reasonable adjustments and develop policies to address specific personal and work related needs. Thus research is needed to identify the impact that discriminatory practices has on CD sufferers.

**The research project:**

We have identified above that there are significant gaps in law covering coeliac sufferers’ equality rights and that discrimination may exist toward coeliac people in the workplace. Also, it is the lack of knowledge that leads to instances of bullying and of social exclusion and the proposed research will seek to further understanding by both employers and employees of the disease and its impact in the workplace. Evidence, as detailed above, suggests that there is a lack of understanding within the workplace; that bullying and social exclusion exist; and, that these run counter to policies and practice of ensuring dignity for all at work.

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