

# Stress in humanitarian workers: The case of the UNHCR office in Senegal

**To the Editor:** In emerging countries, the consequences of stress remain undervalued. Stress in the workplace is increasingly recognised as one of the most serious occupational health hazards, reducing workers' satisfaction and productivity, as well as increasing absenteeism and turnover.<sup>[1-3]</sup> A heavy workload, a lack of recognition of the work done and communication difficulties are things that can cause stress.<sup>[4]</sup> There is also the need to deal with situations where people feel disempowered (by the suffering of aid recipients, or war) or situations of waiting without the possibility of acting for security reasons.<sup>[5]</sup> We conducted a study to assess the prevalence of stress among the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and its local partner (Office Africain pour le Développement et la Coopération, OFADEC) staff in Dakar, Senegal, and to determine the main stress factors.

We conducted a descriptive cross-sectional study from 30 May to 30 December 2012. Sixty individuals were selected through random sampling. Using a self-administered questionnaire, we recorded the sociodemographic characteristics, lifestyle, working conditions, career plan and proposals for improvement, assessment of stress and relational problems of the staff. Data were entered and processed using Epi-Info 3.5.4 and Microsoft Excel (USA) software.

Fifty-two employees responded, and participated in the study: 30 from OFADEC and 22 from UNHCR, with a predominance of males (sex ratio 1.73). It was a young population, with the majority being between 20 and 39 years of age (53.84%) (Table 1). Only 11.53% smoked, and 15.38% had sleep disorders. Over three-quarters (78.8%) of respondents had a fixed-term contract. The prevalence of stress was estimated to be 40.38% ( $n=21$ ), predominantly within the male population (sex ratio 2). Almost all stressed people (92.9%) worked in a team, and 66.7% had been working continuously during the last 12 months. A total of 42.9% ( $n=25$ ) felt exhausted, worried (23.8%,  $n=12$ ), ill (19%,  $n=10$ ) or had gone through several other feelings (14.3%,  $n=7$ ). Nearly three-quarters (71.4%,  $n=37$ ) of stressed individuals took an aggressive approach to stress and slightly more than half (56.7%,  $n=29$ ) reported being verbally abused.

The prevalence of stress was high compared with some studies reported in the literature.<sup>[6,7]</sup> The type of renewable 1-year contract used in UN organisations and non-governmental organisations creates job insecurity, especially towards the end of the contract, and is therefore a source of stress among employees. The stressed people of our series encountered not only multiple relational problems with refugees, but also with colleagues and in the hierarchy. Effective management of stress at work requires organisational arrangements that are conducive to the physical and mental health of workers.

**Table 1. Distribution of workers by age group**

Age group (years)	OFADEC <i>n</i> , (%)	UNHCR <i>n</i> , (%)	Total <i>n</i> , (%)
20 - 39	16 (53.33)	12 (54.55)	28 (53.84)
40 - 59	14 (46.67)	9 (40.90)	23 (44.23)
>60	0 (0)	1 (4.55)	1 (1.93)
Total	30 (100)	22 (100)	52 (100)

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# CORRESPONDENCE

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