The costs of presenteeism may be considerable. Some estimates suggest that it is more damaging to organizations than absenteeism. The cost of presenteeism from back pain, joint pain and headache may be in the billions of dollars in the US, due to decreased productivity from people who come to work when they are ill.6 One can imagine how a worker struggling with alcoholism, drug-addiction or depression can cause damage in the workplace. The spread of infectious diseases can also be worsened by coming to work when sick, especially during influenza epidemics. Widera documented an outbreak of gastroenteritis in a nursing home, that affected 41 residents and staff, that was exacerbated by staff members who were ill yet who continued to come to work.7 Health care workers and teachers, psychologically prone to presenteeism, may present a special risk to their patients and students with regard to infections.

It helps to identify people who are suffering presenteeism and to develop strategies to prevent this from happening in the first place. We need to know our patients as people first. Understanding the life story, the family context, and the background of coworkers and patients can help identify the factors that may lead to presenteeism.

Presenteeism is a documented problem among family doctors. In a sample of doctors in Australia, poor sleep habits, lack of exercise, psychological distress, and a tendency to burnout were found to be associated with coming to work when ill.8 By promoting healthy life-styles, a good work life balance, adequate nutrition, good sleep hygiene, regular physical exercise, and timely vacations among our colleagues, we may take important steps that to prevent presenteeism. A progressive, non-punitive sick leave policy is also helpful.

Employers like the National Health Service and mid-level managers (like the ACeS or regional groups of health centres in Portugal) also have a role to play in helping employees find the balance between the demands of work and their own health. We must provide workers...
with a healthy work environment, offer the help they need when they are ill, and give them time to recover in order to return to productive work. Research on presenteeism in health care in Portugal is needed. The results of these studies would be welcome for publication here.

REFERENCES

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None reported

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