Handling the heat
How an osteopath is supporting Fire & Rescue

Firefighters undertake one of the most physically demanding and hazardous roles imaginable. The Fire & Rescue services rush to the aid of others, and they need a helping hand to keep themselves fit to do so. We speak to Michael Andreou, an osteopath who has been working with Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue Service, getting firefighters fit for duty.

How did you get involved with Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue (DWRF)?

It started in 2011, a colleague who is Biomechanist, Jo Abbott, had met a Physical Trainer for the Fire Service who had attended one of her biomechanics course. He then became a patient of hers, and mentioned that the service was coming up for tender and encouraged her to apply. It was quite fortunate really. She approached me to join her in the application, and it proved successful.

What does this work involve?

The service operates one day a week, with around eight patients being seen during that time. The DWRF staff would come to clinic with appointments made in advance, allowing us to be provided with their medical history, sick leave records, and other relevant information.

We would take a case history as normal, and on the back of this we would deliver a report with our recommendations. This could suggest placing them on restricted duties, or how they could be phased back to work with certain conditions, such as playing a different part in the team that should be more manageable with their condition.

Most patients have a maximum of six sessions, so it is crucial to use them efficiently. We try to space the sessions out in the most effective way to manage and monitor their recovery, and provide them with as much information and support as possible for them to continue their rehabilitation between the times we see them. We were also involved in the return to work assessments, which would involve testing if they could operate the equipment effectively, roll out the hoses, and other tasks.

A large part of our approach was being proactive, and we kept musculoskeletal sickness at a record low. When the situation was reactive, the goal was to return them to fitness and reduce unnecessary time away from active duty as quickly as possible.

Have you enjoyed the role?

It is very interesting work, particularly the journey of getting them back to work. It was very rewarding, and we got a feel for how complicated and demanding the work of the firefighter is. We took part in their training to get a feel for how their activities could affect them, so we put on the equipment to get an idea of the weight and how it restricts movement, and did a number of the drills to get a sense of what they were putting their bodies through. That was important for us from a biomechanical point of view to get a real understanding of what they were doing, and it gave the firefighter confidence that we knew what we were talking about.

How could an osteopath get involved in similar work?

We found out about the opportunity by chance, these things aren’t as widely promoted as you’d expect. If my colleague didn’t already have the connection she did do, we wouldn’t have known to put ourselves forward. My suggestion would be to look at interesting areas where you think an osteopath could help, make contact with them and see if there is a current service, and if so when this will be open to tender. If there isn’t already something in place, then use it as an opportunity and explain how an osteopath could support them.

We never knew what was going to walk through the door. When patients presented with acute pain, or a restriction of movement following traumatic incident the object was for us to find why their tissues were not able to withstand the strains placed on it and how to enable them to not only recover from this injury, but to prevent a possible reoccurrence. It was resulting from a mix of The were common themes; back pain was the most prevalent, followed by elbows and shoulders.

Firefighters are highly trained and in short supply, so a focus of our work was to return them to fitness and reduce unnecessary time away from active duty.

Their work is quite unique, with a constantly changing work environment. They could be scaling a building in the morning, and cutting someone out a car a few hours later, adapting to the situation as they go. Slips on wet surfaces were, unsurprisingly, quite common. Their work is also becoming more challenging in other ways, for example people are getting much heavier, we had one patient who’d injured himself lifting someone out of bath. Furthermore, with some of the retained firefighters, they can hurt themselves during their day jobs.

You also have to consider that there is a lot of adrenaline fuelling their activities, which combined with having little to no time to warm-up for this activity, causes problems. It’s not really avoidable, they go from a cold-start and aren’t necessarily thinking about their body mechanics when they’re in the thick of the action.

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