

## Advice line is set up for lonely judges

Frances Gibb, Legal Editor

A 24-hour counselling helpline is being set up to help judges to deal with the emotional problems and stresses of the job. The Lord Chief Justice is introducing the helpline after a survey found that judges felt in need of “practical and emotional support”.

Judges have a far bigger workload, both in terms of cases and administration, than they did a few years ago and are also exposed to tougher media and public scrutiny.

Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers, Britain’s most senior judge, is concerned that this could deter people from wanting to become judges.

He said: “Judging is necessarily a solitary task, and can be lonely.” The formalities of the new appointments procedures could be affecting recruitment, he said, and although the administrative duties added to the variety of the job, they might “discourage” lawyers from joining the judiciary.

The helpline, manned by professional counsellors, will open in April and will be available to all 1,400 full-time judges, from the district bench right up to the Lord Chief Justice.

They can seek advice on stress, bereavement, emotional issues, relationship problems, retirement, general health concerns and the effects of trauma after assaults or accidents.

Judges often feel isolated after the camaraderie among lawyers. The nature of the work can be stressful, and if they are seen to make an error they face vitriolic criticism from the press or politicians.

Last year it was reported that Scotland’s most senior judge was being treated in hospital for stress. Lord Hamilton had become Lord President of the Court of Session and Lord Justice General six months earlier.

The work is also emotionally taxing: a judge recently broke down in tears after hearing a mother’s emotional statement to the court about the impact of the loss of her daughter, a young doctor, in a car crash.

The Lord Chief Justice became responsible for the welfare of judges in England and Wales under the Constitutional Reform Act 2005.

The helpline will be modelled on one that already exists for civil servants. The initial call will be followed up by face-to-face or telephone counselling and advice. If appropriate, judges will be referred to specialist groups for more assistance. The process would offer confidentiality, subject to certain safeguards in cases where a counsellor was obliged in law to disclose matters revealed.

The Lord Chief Justice will be writing to judges to explain the scheme and how it can be accessed. Usage levels and feedback will be monitored.

The United States has similar schemes, particularly for judges working in isolated rural areas. In 1995 in Australia, Justice Michael Kirby, then president of the Court of Appeal in New South Wales, gave a speech on judicial stress, which he termed “the unmentionable topic”. He said: “Life in the courts can be a stressful business. Yet stress is a subject which neither judge nor advocate is supposed to admit.”

Surveys had shown that lawyers were among the professions most likely to suffer from depression and stress and judges had been found to have “alarming levels of stress”. He described the transition from practising lawyer to judge as a “journey to loneliness”.

Lord Phillips announced the helpline when delivering a speech to mark his first year as head of the judiciary under the Government's new constitutional arrangements.

He also gave warning about the dangers of extending police powers to impose on-the-spot fines for offences that should go before the courts.

He said that the working of the judicial system was being hampered by "damaging" cuts and indicated his opposition to the mandatory life sentence for murder.

### **Plea for help**

The judiciary is under strain because of:

- Increasing workload
- Administrative duties
- Emotionally and intellectually demanding nature of the work
- Greater public scrutiny
- Criticism by the media and politicians
- Loneliness, and having to go out on circuit
- Financial disadvantages
- Lack of appreciation and feedback
- Mid-life crisis

Source: 1995 speech by Justice Michael Kirby