

SLEEP EDUCATOR OPPORTUNITIES—IT’S A REVOLUTION

By Brendan Duffy, RST, RPSGT

If not here, then where? If not us, then who? If not now, then when? These are questions I pondered as I researched what opportunities were available for newly minted Certified Sleep Educator (CSE) graduates and Certified Clinical Sleep Health Educator (CCSH) credential holders. After years of public speaking on sleep matters to many different audiences, I am in the process of applying for my CCSH designation. As you will see from the information that follows, I am convinced that the need for sleep educators is here to stay and technologists and others with this credential will be utilized in a multitude of new areas and settings in the future. We are all familiar with the possibilities for working inside a hospital in a sleep educator role. The types of programs you usually think of and could create in the medical setting, include sleep apnea awareness programs, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) adaptation classes, compliance education, pediatric sleep awareness, nutrition and sleep, diabetes and sleep, etc. Dr. Marta Maczaj, Co-Director of the St. Charles Sleep Disorders Center in Port Jefferson N.Y., and a prominent speaker with regard to sleep issues sees our mission as educators in this manner, “We need to focus our sleep educational efforts anywhere that there is an interest in health. For instance, fitness centers, schools, sport teams ... Nowadays, sleep should be considered the third side — along with diet and exercise — in the triangle of good health”.

Dr. Mohammad Amin, also a Co-Director of St. Charles Sleep Center, and with extensive experience working with retired military veterans, as well as returning military men and women added, “Sleep education has gained tremendous momentum at the federal level in both the military and transportation areas. Sleep disturbances have been linked to post traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders. These represent a golden opportunity for an enterprising sleep educator to develop programs that educate those designated populations and support the work of the sleep specialists that treat these military groups and their families”.

Community health fairs and community presentations are also wonderful venues to utilize your educator credential. After all, if the community doesn’t get the information from properly credentialed, trained, and certified sleep professionals, we run the risk of losing this audience to internet “sleep coaches” with little or no sleep medicine experience. A quick search of the internet delivers an abundance of such sleep coaches who claim to be “certified” via their own online schools and programs. Much like the late night ads for snoring solutions, these programs all too often do nothing more than separate desperate individuals or parents from their money and/or true solutions. They also give a bad name to the good work we do. But why do they exist and prosper? Because they fill a void that we did not have the ability to fill until recently. Now, we can offer the assistance that these patients and parents need; and we have science, knowledge, and experience behind our RPSGT, CSE and CCSH credentials. Another avenue for job possibilities and an arena that has been utilizing sleep experts to assist their mission is inside the sports world. For years, great attention was given to an athlete’s diet, and their workout regimen. However, scant, if any, attention was paid to what happened for the other 8 hours of time the athlete was out of the training facility. That is rapidly changing. Professional and college coaches are contacting sleep professionals to assist them with everything from training schedules, bedroom set up, sleep hygiene, travel scheduling and time zone management. Even the Olympic teams of various countries have been very involved in how sleep impacts their athletes’ performance and how they can gain an edge using sleep information. They have sought out sleep experts to assist them in their preparations.

For the past few years, teams from the MLB, NFL, and NHL have been hiring sleep experts to assist them in managing this mystery of sleep. Just this past spring training season, the New York Yankees brought in a sleep expert to assist with the spring schedule and to work with individuals to assist them. The experts pushed back the customary 7 a.m. start time for daily spring training drills to allow the players to get much needed rest and to emulate a schedule similar to the regular season. After all, spring training should train for the regular season schedule. Players stated anecdotally that they were better focused and able to learn better with the later start time. In another baseball camp, a player was complaining of being tired and having what his General Manager described as being “disjointed sleep”. He was sent for a sleep study, which revealed that he had severe sleep apnea! Other sleep research in baseball has indicated that players that tend toward a higher Epworth Sleepiness Score (ESS) tend also not to last as long in the league as their lower ESS scoring



BRENDAN DUFFY, RST, RPSGT

Brendan Duffy, RST, RPSGT is the Coordinator/Manager of a six bed AASM accredited sleep disorders center at St. Charles Hospital in Port Jefferson, N.Y. With almost 20 years of sleep medicine experience, he enjoys speaking and writing on various sleep topics especially sleep as it relates to athletic competition and performance.

counterparts. Still other sleep research indicated that fatigue caused significant performance decreases as the season wore on for major league batters. These types of studies lend credence to the need for professional help to manage the sleep of professional athletes. Some hockey teams such as the Vancouver Canucks have worked with sleep experts for years in an attempt to mitigate the fatigue they experience from the 55,000 miles they travel each season! While working with the sleep experts, the Canucks posted the best winning percentage on the road (in spite of all the travel.) in one season (2012) and also were very strong in endurance at the end of games. They frequently outscored their opponents in the final period of play. This appears to be testament, at least in part, to the scheduling changes, conditioning and awareness that was promoted by their “sleep team”.

It's not just the pros that are hiring sleep educators to teach them how to use this “secret weapon” we call sleep. Many colleges have hired sleep consultants to assist their players and have seen great benefits. Some of these, such as the University of Tennessee, have had their best season in years after making sleep adjustments! Some other teams benefitting include the University of Pittsburgh football team and the highly successful Florida State University Women's Soccer team. All of these teams realize the competitive edge that a well-rested athlete has in both their competition and academic life.

Whether it is at the professional, college, or high school level, jobs can be found, or created, by sleep technologists with a sleep educator background and an interest in helping to develop sleep awareness in various settings. Other group settings that would benefit from sleep awareness programs include gyms, nutrition and diet programs, college health classes, adult living facilities, and personal trainer or life coach programs. If they don't already have a sleep coach, a very enterprising sleep technologist can make a presentation to these groups to show how important and how vital sleep is to the success of their programs.

Another area that also has been utilizing sleep consultants is the business/corporate world. With a recent sizable awareness boost in the importance of sleep from the likes of Arianna Huffington of the *Huffington Post* (author of the best seller book *The Sleep Revolution*) we are seeing many articles and blogs that are focused on how employers need to be retrained to learn the importance of sleep. We are now publically addressing how much money sleep deprived employees are costing companies as a result of lack of creativity, work related injuries, mistakes, sick days, and poor business decisions. In his book *Dreamland*, author David Randall predicts the need for a new future corporate title in Human Resources departments. He believes that as we begin to seriously tackle the issue of sleep-deprived workers, 24-hour schedules, shift work, and businesses that never close, the new title of Fatigue Management Officer will adorn the door of offices in many corporate

headquarters. What better background for those seeking these new corporate sleep positions than a sleep clinician and educator?

One example of sleep emerging as important to corporations is the increase of nap rooms in various corporations such as Google, Ben and Jerry's, Zappos, and the *Huffington Post*. In addition, Aetna Insurance Company is actually paying their employers to increase their sleep time at home. Employees can earn up to \$300 just for increasing their sleep time. The management staff at Aetna realizes that a more rested and refreshed employee makes for a more creative, positive and healthier employee. Other companies have placed a “ban” on emailing their employees with work related inquiries while the employee is at home or on vacation. They are showing respect for the employees' rest time by doing so. Several corporations have hired sleep experts to address sleep issues via live presentations, or for their expert help in creating employee health topic videos. These developments indicate a positive shifting culture for companies and more opportunities for sleep educators.

Dr. Maczaj has worked with a few of these entities and just recently completed a sleep hygiene video for HBO which will be available for HBO employees on their internal corporate human resources (HR) employee wellness video service. These types of opportunities, as well as the obvious need for sleep education and structuring in the transportation industry, will open up a multitude of opportunities for the enterprising sleep educator. Just this past month, the Long Island Railroad announced plans to test and treat their railroad employees for sleep issues. This is great news for the health of these employees, the safety of the riders, and the opportunities we will have to share our sleep knowledge and experiences with the general public as more transportation services “get on board” with the importance of sleep as an issue to be managed. “The transportation industry has been aware of the disastrous consequences of sleep deprivation for many years and now the corporate world is recognizing the importance of sleep. Major corporations such as HBO, Bloomberg News, Nielsen, and NASDAQ recognize the negative effect that poor sleep has on health and productivity and they have incorporated sleep programs for their employees” said Dr. Maczaj.

The need for sleep educators is here now; and the time is right for us as the true sleep educators to take our knowledge and experience out to the corporate world. While most of my personal speaking engagements have revolved around my interest in sports performance and sleep, I have been asked to speak to diverse groups on other areas of sleep health this past year. These groups include adult communities, the dental students at Stony Brook University, the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) group, fire departments, library groups, our hospital stroke recovery meeting and the local county chapter of a group for the disabled. These groups are excellent places to start as a provider of sleep education.

These opportunities, coupled with the upsurge in employee wellness interest from the corporate world, are very exciting and welcome developments for sleep professionals. I envision that this new world focused on corporate sleep will evolve into a separate subsection of sleep science entitled fatigue science that will be devoted primarily to the impact of sleep issues in the working and competitive world. It will tackle the tough issues for employees such as jetlag, shift work, travel, balancing home and work life, use of sleep aids, employee sleep disorders, etc.

The future is bright for those that are trained, knowledgeable and passionate about educating others about sleep. Sleep technology never was just a “sleep tech and hospital test” issue. Like improper diet and lack of exercise, sleep is an important area that can sabotage our health if it is not managed properly. This clearly involves promoting and teaching a new lifestyle to an audience

in dire need. It is using your skill set and knowledge to help heal and prevent disease and injuries from grabbing a foothold. This is accomplished by focusing on sleep as an active and crucial element of health.

As you look around you will notice the dynamics in sleep medicine and personal health are changing. People want, and receive much more health information and can track their personal health (including sleep) much easier today using electronic devices. And, as Arianna Huffington states, there truly is a sleep revolution underway... and we, as educators, are on the front lines of the revolution! Embrace your career and the many opportunities that await you as sleep educators. I, for one, am very excited about what great experiences await us! Enjoy the challenges and creativity that will engulf you in your role as a sleep educator during the sleep revolution! ❖

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