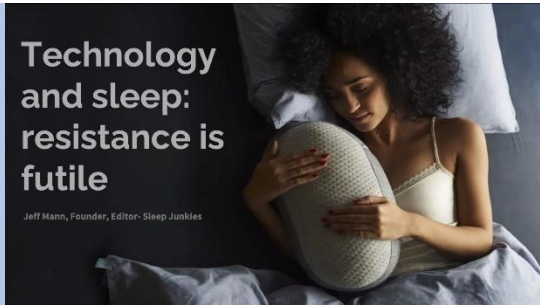# Making Sleep: New agendas for a new public health?

7th and 8th July 2021

University of Surrey

Symposium Report: Professor Rob Meadows (Surrey), Professor Christine Hine (Surrey) and Professor Jason Ellis (Northumbria)

Background to the event

It has become commonplace to read headlines like the following (from the [Independent](#))

News

'Catastrophic' lack of sleep in modern society is killing us, warns leading sleep scientist

Responses to this 'crisis' have been numerous. In 2019, the BBC News reported that the UK Government were planning to issue guidance on how much sleep people should be getting every night. This resonated with calls from the UK Royal Society for Public Health, for a 'slumber number' to be published which makes it easier for individuals to know how much they should be sleeping. The United States National Sleep Foundation has also recently issued age-specific sleep duration recommendations.

These strategies may appear misguided. For one, sleep is liminal and beyond the limits of voluntary agency. It is also linked to social position – with race, ethnicity, culture, employment, neighbourhood, socioeconomic status, marriage, and the family environment all impacting on an individual's sleep. Those not currently in paid employment and those with lower education have higher odds of sleep problems even when other factors are controlled for.

Others have called for more research/sleep science or held large-scale meetings to discuss the implementation gap and the gulf between research and policy. Recommendations here include: researching costs/benefits associated with screening/diagnosing and treating insomnia; promoting education and literacy regarding obstructive sleep apnea; increasing the number of students who get sufficient sleep; and performing trials aimed at improving treatment adherence for sleep disordered breathing. Yet it remains unclear how this is to be achieved and conversations are periodically repeated with little tangible progress.

We need to innovate. If we are to achieve a national sleep strategy, we need a radical departure from traditional thinking. This was the focus of the Making Sleep event held on the 7th and 8th July. …The workshop brought together scholars and practitioners to debate and discuss how we might move beyond traditional confines and work towards a national sleep strategy. It had the following objectives:

(i)   To provide a state-of-the-art map of the multiple ways in which sleep is being made in contemporary society (such as through wearable technologies, home EEG technologies, art, literature, clinical expertise, treatments such as CBT-I and pharmaceuticals)

(ii) To use this as an evidence base to explore the possibilities of new conceptual frames for understanding contemporary sleep – for example, asking whether we should move away from viewing sleep as a single object.

(iii) Explore the implications therein for a new public health for sleep

The event – which was originally scheduled to run face to face in July 2020 – was held over zoom on the 7th and 8th July 2021. Nearly 100 people signed up for the event from 20 different countries.

Delegates came from a range of disciplines/industries – including neuroscience, pharmacy, charity sector, electrical engineering, gerontology, dentistry, sleep medicine, nursing, allied healthcare, occupational health, anthropology, transport safety and clinical psychology.

Event themes

Day 1 of the event was focussed on exploring 'the complexities of sleep' across different domains (the clinic, technology, art/literature and public health). It began with a series of keynotes and ended with breakaway groups. Several common threads appeared, including:

Reflecting on the idea of 'crisis'

Diletta De Cristofaro rightly brought our attention to the fact that experts are divided as to whether society is actually profoundly sleep deprived. Diletta called for more engagement with this idea of a sleep crisis and what it tells us about current conceptions of sleep and health. Breakout groups also suggested that researchers might be 'guilty' of using this terminology and language of 'crisis' in grant applications to get the message across and perpetuating issues.

The complexities of good sleep

Louise Berger discussed how some people are currently beyond the reach of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) and how a focus on sleep can be a driver for poor sleep. Louise also asked us to consider the idea of 'good sleep' embedded within CBT-I. Meadows also looked at the sleep quality of 200,000 people across 68 countries. Whilst there seemed to be remarkable consistency in what the concept of sleep quality meant across the data, estimates of threshold parameters suggest that those with more years of education have an increased threshold for reporting mild sleep problems but a lower threshold for reporting sleep problems as severe or extreme.

The complex relationship between technology and sleep

Jeff Mann described what he called the 'mother of all ironies' – we need tech solutions to help us fix the damage tech may have caused to our sleep. In discussing transhumanism, Jeff also made clear that people engage with sleep for a variety of different reasons. The importance of 'difference' and 'complexity' was echoed in Christine Hine's talk – where we heard that different forms of sleep knowledge co-exist in online spaces, but disparities are often challenged. Christine also highlighted how sleep discourse is shaped according to features and conventions of different platforms

Day 2 focused on building 'responses' to this complexity. Dr Michael Grandner outlined current socio-ecological approaches to sleep health and the importance of taking into account social inequalities; as well as individual, family and contextual determinants of sleep health. Building upon this, Professor Martyn Pickersgill highlighted how multi-perspectival responses are needed. Humanities and social sciences have much to offer here; but efforts are required to think about how these

conceptual frames can be brought into dialogue and how different disciplines can work alongside and with one another. For example, sociology will invariably shift across the roles of 'champion', 'critical friend' and/or 'critique'.

The day ended with a panel discussion – led by Professor Derk-Jan Dijk - and wider conversation amongst delegates.

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Outcomes

Recommendations from the workshop include: (i) continuing to take account of social inequalities; (ii) thinking critically about 'framing' and the current language of crisis; (iii) exploring the nuanced relationship between technology and sleep; (iv) recognising that the future is likely to get more complex; and (iv) continuing to reflect on how best to build multidisciplinary teams and embed social science within discussions of public health and sleep.

From this, immediate implications for practice include:

Framing: (i) Consider moving away from talking about disease, disorder and destruction; (ii) consider getting people to buy in to sleep by talking about health and happiness; (iii) consider moving away from concepts which attempt to quantify sleep (e.g. optimal sleep duration), towards a language of sleep need, sleep opportunity, sleep ability as underpinnings of sleep quality and sleep health. Goal in the outset of work by public health should normalise sleep, not create nomothetics.

Local Strategies: (i) Work on *strategies* rather than a single public health *strategy*. Some of these may not talk to sleep at all (but rather focus on determinants, such as poverty). Sleep opportunity is not always about 'choice'; (ii) building up from *understandings* – what do people think - and use this as the focus for interventions. Reflecting the points above, this is likely to result in *multiple, local, interventions.*

Next Steps

A video version of this report is currently being produced. We will continue to explore the utility of releasing other talks from the event.

The team are also in the process of identifying a space and format for an online, dialogic, community – with a view to using this community to continue discussions and develop a collective/edited report. It is likely that future grant applications will also draw on this network.

Acknowledgements