

Corona crisis: Questions to DESY's company doctor Katharina Bünz



Dr Bünz, what does your typical day look like these days?

Our way of working has changed extremely. Although the company medical service is still open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., only a few of our staff still come to us personally. In return, we communicate via phone and email much more often.

Phone and email - is that the best way to contact you in Corona times?

Yes! We set up our own e-mail address for this purpose weeks ago together with the HR department: health.service@desy.de. Our personnel manager Sonja Gebert and her team take care of personnel law, my team answers mainly medical questions. By the way, all questions are answered quickly - even if the answers sometimes come at unusual times.

What are people most concerned about?

On the one hand there are questions regarding personnel law. People who were on a skiing holiday wonder whether they now have to go into quarantine and whether they still receive their salary. On the other hand, we deal with a many very personal health concerns: people wondering whether they belong to the risk group, how to behave or whether their symptoms might be a sign of a corona infection. There is a great need for information and discussion.

In this context: What do you recommend to staff in general?

Apart from the confirmed cases there are probably also people at DESY (like everywhere else) who are infected, show no symptoms themselves, but can infect others. And there are others who suffer from colds, coughs, hoarseness, but do not necessarily have to carry the corona virus. Therefore we urgently advise: Please stay at home even if the symptoms are very mild! At the moment, it is generally accepted that you should work from home if possible. If you suspect an infection, a test should be carried out by the family doctor. Very important: we here at DESY do not test ourselves!

Have the corona worries of the staff changed over the last few days?

Indeed, new questions have arisen concerning isolation, loneliness and the psychological stress caused by these. I had my first case of somebody who did not cope well with isolation. These problems may become more frequent if the current rule of social distancing lasts longer.

Are you prepared for this? And how do you help people in psychological distress?

As usual, our Occupational Health Management (BGM) team offers crisis counselling, currently by telephone. The team includes Ramona Matthes, Natascha Peleikis and myself. We are all competent in consulting and I can well imagine that our telephone consultancy will become more important than ever. If required, we can also offer our crisis consulting via video.

How does the corona situation for DESY differ from other employers?

We have many international colleagues here, not all of whom have a family doctor. This is a problem in the current situation. They are young, they are fit, they are here for two years, and they don't immediately look for a family doctor. The same applies to immigrants from other federal states. We are now helping all of them to find a suitable path in our health system.

Do scientists actually handle such a crisis differently?

I fear that our people are sometimes a little over-informed. Our colleagues don't just believe when someone - a company doctor, for example - tells them something, but rather check themselves several times. Even in normal times, some of them come to me after having previously made their own diagnosis. My task is then to translate and classify this information to the individual situation.

Are DESY staff behaving appropriately at the moment?

I find the handling of the crisis at DESY as a whole exemplary. Individual solutions are sought with prudence. What I mean to say is: We have always looked closely and readjusted what is possible under which conditions in order to continue to pursue science. I am personally impressed by how quickly almost an entire research centre can switch over to home office and video meetings, for example. It's a joint effort that I think is great!

What's your message of hope to staff?

DESY is proving to be an exemplary employer who feels responsible and cares for its employees; also economically. It will be several weeks before the measures taken so far show any effect. The biggest pressure on hospitals is probably still to come. But our healthcare system in Germany is very well positioned and I am confident that we will overcome the crisis. Even if, of course, this means a previously unknown challenge for all of us at present.

As a doctor, I can only appeal here once again to consistent social distancing. That does not mean human distance, however. We can and should now look after each other, keep in touch and laugh together. Real togetherness with spatial distance is not a contradiction, but an opportunity.

About:

Katharina Bünz has been responsible for the company medical service at DESY since 2009. She holds a doctorate in occupational medicine and internal medicine and, with her additional qualifications in basic psychosomatic care and nutritional medicine, has specialised in preventive health protection. She cooperates closely with the BGM (occupational health management) group, which was created in 2018 and combines health-related services at DESY in addition to the classical occupational medicine.

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