

'Where have all the bloody teaspoons gone?'



"Where have all the bloody teaspoons gone?" is an age old question in the workplace. In this week's BMJ, researchers at the Burnet Institute in Australia attempt to measure the phenomenon of teaspoon loss and its effect on office life.

They purchased and discreetly numbered 70 stainless steel teaspoons (54 of standard quality and 16 of higher quality). The teaspoons were placed in tearooms around the institute and were counted weekly over five months.

After five months, staff were told about the research project and asked to complete a brief anonymous questionnaire about their attitudes towards and knowledge of teaspoons and teaspoon theft.

During the study, 56 (80%) of the 70 teaspoons disappeared. The half life of the teaspoons was 81 days (that is, half had disappeared permanently after that time). The half life of teaspoons in communal tearooms (42 days) was significantly shorter than those in rooms linked to particular research groups (77 days).

The rate of loss was not influenced by the teaspoons' value and the overall incidence of teaspoon loss was 360.62 per 100 teaspoon years. At this rate, an estimated 250 teaspoons would need to be purchased annually to maintain a workable population of 70 teaspoons, say the authors.

The questionnaire showed that most employees (73%) were dissatisfied with teaspoon coverage in the institute, suggesting that teaspoons are an essential part of office life. The rapid rate of teaspoon loss shows that their availability (and therefore office life) is under constant assault.

One possible explanation for the phenomenon is resistentialism (the theory that inanimate objects have a natural aversion to humans), they write. This is demonstrated by the fact that people have little or no control over teaspoon migration.

Given the widely applicable nature of these results, they suggest that the development of effective control measures against the loss of teaspoons should be a research priority.

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