

The Health and Work Handbook



Patient care and occupational
health: a partnership guide for primary
care and occupational health teams



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Introduction

This information leaflet has been produced to help primary care teams and occupational health professionals who care for and advise patients of working age. A full version of the Health and Work Handbook, with learning resources and case studies, is available on the websites of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (www.facocmed.ac.uk), the Royal College of General Practitioners (www.rcgp.org.uk) and the Society of Occupational Medicine (www.som.org.uk).

Why is the relationship between health and work so important in patient care? Helping patients to stay in work, or return to work, after absence due to illness or injury, is an important part of the therapeutic process and essential to restoring quality of life.

- Injury, illness and disability do not necessarily equal inability to work
- 'Worklessness' - being unemployed or economically inactive and in receipt of working age benefits - leads to poor health and social inequalities
- People who are out of work experience poorer mental health than those in employment. They make increased use of general practitioner (GP) and hospital services and use more prescribed medication. Anxiety and depression are two to three times more common amongst unemployed people.
- Many people on Incapacity Benefit want to work and could do so if they had support

Where health problems may be affecting fitness for work, what the GP and the primary care team say is vitally important, and can change patient perceptions and behaviour. Positive messages about the right work being an enhancer of health can be conveyed to patients.

Roles, responsibilities and ethics

Roles

- Both primary care and occupational health teams aim to promote good health and to prevent disease. Recognising that a return to work improves health outcomes in the long-term, primary care teams have an important role in encouraging patients to remain at work, or to return to employment

Responsibilities

- A doctor or nurse needs to give competent opinions on fitness for work and rehabilitation, mindful of their responsibilities to all parties: individuals, other workers, society and the requirements of the law
- Occupational health professionals often act in difficult circumstances where there are conflicts between employer and employee. Their opinions must be impartial and fair

Confidentiality

- Primary care and occupational health teams are bound by a duty to respect the confidentiality of patient/employee information. Occupational

health services treat individual occupational health records in the same way as personal medical records held by GPs

- Occupational health departments will not normally refer to clinical details when writing to employers. They may state that an employee is fit, unfit or that restrictions are required, but the employer doesn't usually need to know the clinical details behind that advice

Communication

- Good communication is crucial to the partnership between primary care and occupational health.

Occupational health best practice includes:

- Informing the primary care team of work-related facts which may have a bearing on the health of their patients
- Explaining the reasons for requesting health reports from primary care, and specifying the information that is required from the GP
- Providing a full explanation to patients of the reasons for communicating with their GP, and obtaining informed written consent to do so

Primary care best practice includes:

- Considering the implications for the patient's job of any diagnosis or treatment plan and recognising that returning to work is an indicator of successful outcome of treatment
- Finding out from the patient if their employer has an occupational health service that could be involved in practical discussions on managing the patient's return to work.

- Giving clear information on medical certificates whenever possible, including an accurate diagnosis
 - Providing reports as quickly as possible, as delay can be detrimental to patients' livelihoods
- Fitness for work: medical certification**
- GPs sometimes feel under pressure to provide certification of unfitness for work for patients in circumstances where they are unsure if this is appropriate. It is important that primary health care teams are able to emphasise the risks of prolonged sickness absence and the positive health advantages of work, in, for example, the recovery from depressive illness or musculoskeletal problems such as low back pain.
 - For absences of less than seven days a GP is not normally required to provide certification. For absences lasting more than seven days patients may require advice on fitness for work, which their GP records on an official statement (e.g. Form Med 3 or Med 5). This advice relates to the patient's usual occupation. Guidance on fitness for work and medical certification can be found in document IB204 'A Guide for Registered Medical Practitioners', available on the Department for Work and Pensions website: www.dwp.gov.uk
- Sources of support and advice**
- Local:**
- Your local NHS occupational health department may be able to assist with specific enquiries. Occupational physicians and nurses will always

be willing to talk about complicated or difficult occupational health issues, and to give general advice to GPs. They may be part of the NHS Plus network, offering services to small and medium-sized enterprises and other employers. Information can be obtained at www.nhsplus.nhs.uk

- There are a large number of occupational health service providers in the UK, including national organisations and smaller consultancies, offering occupational health advice to employers, based on an item-of-service system or on a service level agreement. Information can be obtained from the Commercial Occupational Health Providers Association: www.cohpa.co.uk

The medical and nursing staff of the Employment Medical Advisory Service are trained in occupational health and will provide general advice to GPs, or can direct you to other local resources. Contacts can be found on the Health and Safety Executive website: www.hse.gov.uk

National:

- Department for Work and Pensions: the DWP Corporate Medical Group website has a wealth of information on medical certification of sickness, benefits and employment and health. There are educational resources, including free DVD / videos, desk aids and a CPD section: www.dwp.gov.uk/medical
- Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: for advice on fitness to drive ("At a glance"). www.dvla.gov.uk

- Information on training in occupational medicine can be obtained from:
 - The Faculty of Occupational Medicine
www.facocmed.ac.uk
 - The Society of Occupational Medicine
www.som.org.uk