

HOT TOPICS IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

From time to time in our management briefing, rather than dealing with one particular issue we hope it will be useful for you to be aware of the latest research in certain areas of occupational health that may have an impact on your organisation, either immediately or in the future.

If there are any particular areas of interest that you would like us to cover in our management briefings please do not hesitate to contact us at talk2us@phcohealth.co.uk.

Raising the Retirement Age

The UK press inform us that Mr Blair's Government is considering raising the retirement age from 65 to 70. This will add an additional 2.5 million individuals to the UK workforce, but may well bring economic costs as well as economic gains.

Recent research indicates that the number of working age adults suffering from dementia could triple if the age of retirement is raised by 5 years from 65 to 70. An older workforce will create higher rates of illness than is seen at present, and the cost of this will have to be borne by employers and the State as sickness absence increases and individuals are absent for more prolonged periods of time.

It is postulated that the increase in health issues seen by an older workforce will place increasing pressures on employers to ensure that they have adequate pre-employment and ongoing in-service health screening in place. Also, that they are able to receive the appropriate competent occupational health advice as mild dementia will be covered by disability discrimination, which will have a further impact on organisations attempting to manage these health issues within the workplace.

In addition to mental capability an older workforce will have higher incidents of other conditions associated with ageing, including high blood pressure, heart problems and musculoskeletal problems. The role of the personal risk assessment will become increasingly important, which again will place significant further responsibilities on managers and for those individuals undertaking the risk assessment.

Occupational Asthma

A recent investigation undertaken by Birmingham University has found that employees in the baking, forestry and chemical industry are more likely to develop adult asthma. The research went on to indicate that male bakers and food processors were more than 8 times as likely to develop asthma as clerks and administrators, while forestry workers were 6 times as likely.

Female employees working as waitresses, cleaners or in dental surgeries also had a higher risk.

The Health & Safety Executive has published a significant amount of useful information on the subject of occupational asthma, including a questionnaire for managers who are concerned that their employees may be exposed to environments where there is an increased risk of asthma.

The HSE's report is available from their website www.hse.gov.uk/research.

Violence at Work

Recent figures published by the Health & Safety Executive are encouraging in that they show a reduction of the number of incidents reported of violence within the workplace. The HSE, however, is adamant that the problem exists and is a significant issue for employers. There are concerns that although the frequency of reports has reduced, the number of incidents may well be more serious and that a significant number of incidents are not reported. Workers in the public sector, particularly those with direct exposure to the general public such as in healthcare, local authorities and the Police, are more at risk from violence. The HSE report went on to indicate that more than 2/3rds of workers who had contact with the general public received no form of training or advice on how to deal with violent behaviour.

Downsizing May Increase Sickness Absence & Risk of Death

The health effects of downsizing and its impact on absence and employee well-being is confusing for both managers and occupational health staff. Research and experience indicates that downsizing increases sickness absence, both before the event and also after. Research also indicates perversely that the risk of death in employees that keep their jobs is higher!

The uncertainties of redundancy, closure or downsizing often increases psychological stress and employers invariably see an increase in sickness absence, either for genuine illness, for individuals who are in fact using sickness absence to hunt for another job or attend an interview or individuals who consider that maintaining a satisfactory level of attendance is not a priority as their jobs are already at risk.

The concerning situation is for those employees who successfully retained their employment, where increasing levels of sickness absence persist and where research would suggest that their level of general health has in fact deteriorated, to the extent where the risk of mortality in these employees is in fact increased.

In those employees who remain in post there are often feelings of guilt, and increasing sickness absence in the permanent staff left in employment can persist for up to seven and a half years. The research also went on to indicate that increased mortality from heart problems doubled in the first four years after downsizing.

How can these results be applied to the workplace?

It is important that when consideration is given to redundancy programmes, closure or downsizing, that an appropriate level of expertise and investment is considered. This should be with regards to preparing employees for the process and supporting the successful employees following the event, when the organisation may be focusing purely on survival and profitability. Further employee support may in fact prove a significant cost benefit.

