

BOOSTING THE BOTTOM LINE IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Managing Sickness Absence

It's easy to put employee health issues in the 'too difficult to handle' tray; but in challenging financial times high employee absence levels and employee sick pay costs become a stark reality.

Employee absence is still reported late, recorded incompletely, or not reported or recorded at all. Many absence management policies do not require managers to take any action until an employee has been absent from work for at least 3 weeks and sometimes much later. Employees who take multiple short term absences often remain 'under the radar' for months or years.

Managers are wary of managing employee sickness because of the perceived authority of the GP Med3 certificate or the legal minefield of disability and the Disability Discrimination Act. Employers that end up in the employment tribunal are typically those that are unwilling to sacrifice time and effort to managing absence fairly and transparently.

The management of a case under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995/2005 requires specialist advice and support, both from an occupational health professional and employment legal advisors. An individual with a disability must not be treated less favourably than other employees. Current case law, however, questions the whole issue as to whether such employees are required to be treated more favourably than other employees.

Psychological and social factors prevent employees returning to work. They are not principally health related or medical problems. There is a temptation, for the employee and the manager to medicalise non medical issues and this is not helped by the current system in the UK which requires a doctor's certificate to legitimise periods of absence from work.

Absence from work is equivalent to smoking 10 packets of cigarettes a day! Long term absence from work increases the risk of suicide, and reduces life expectancy. Absence from work poses greater risks than many dangerous jobs and many killer diseases.

Making contact with an absent employee in the first fortnight, or even within the first week, in a friendly and supportive manner is key. Leaving employees to languish for a

month at home, or in some cases three, will affect the potential for them to return to work.

It is important that employees who are off sick on a long term basis are kept in touch with regularly. There is a significant cost benefit to using occupational health and providing employees with regular access to a proactive occupational health service which can advise not only on the potential to return to work, but also work with management to design a return to work programme.

Long term sickness absence is the most costly form of absence. Once an employee has been absent from work for 4 weeks the potential for them to return to work significantly reduces. Once they have been off for 3 months, the potential for them to return to work at any stage in the future is significantly lower than 50%. The HSE inform us that the most common single reason currently in the UK for long term sickness absence is reactive anxiety and depression, colloquially known as stress. Employee absence is an issue that has to be managed. It cannot be ignored and filed in the 'too difficult to handle' tray and 'organising yoga classes is not an answer to workplace stress'.

For more information with regards to Preventative Healthcare's occupational health services, please do not hesitate to contact Penny Lovelock on 01622 775289 or email: p.lovelock@phcohealth.co.uk

NEW CLINIC

PHC now has a new clinic at Coventry, Warks

If you would like one of your employees seen at our new Coventry venue, please

Contact your PHC Contract Support Administrator who will make the necessary

arrangements.