

Proposed new inclusive Collaborative Centre of Occupational Health

Proposed new inclusive Collaborative Centre of Occupational health and related academic groups, which will include all relevant parties including government bodies, trade organisations, social partners and public and patient participation.

Issue

The UK has the highest proportion of the population on disability benefits in the OECD. We are an ageing population with a significant gap between work participation and pension age. If we cannot enable increased participation of the older population in safe and pleasant work, our economic prosperity and living standards will decline. There are two issues:

- (1) work disability due to health problems;
- (2) an ageing population who need to be helped to stay in work.

Addressing (1) is about interventions that tackle avoidable disability/ improve work ability. Addressing (2) is about providing the right (good) jobs.

Dealing with both requires systems solutions – healthcare, employers and policy working together. We have much of the knowledge on what to do but need that knowledge mobilising into action.

So, a new centre needs to combine implementation research with knowledge brokering. The centre draws on the Government consultation, *Health is everyone's business*, a public consultation seeking views on different ways in which government and employers can take action to reduce ill health-related job loss, including:

- Measures to improve availability of high-quality, cost-effective occupational health (OH) services for employers; and
- Improving advice and support from government for employers to understand and act on their responsibilities.

It also builds on “Healthier Wales” and was initially recommended in the Black Report. In her report, Dame Carol Black estimated the economic costs of sickness absence and worklessness associated with working age ill health at more than £100bn each year, “greater than the current annual budget for the NHS and equivalent to the entire GDP for Portugal”.

In June 2019, the Society of Occupational Medicine published an evidence-based report on ‘The Value of Occupational Health Research’, funded by the Health and Safety Executive. The report identified the important impact of workplace ill health on productivity in the UK, the high associated economic costs and the unmet need for effective research to guide future policy by government and in the workplace.

The present occupational health academic base is relatively weak in numbers and in its level of funding; putting its future sustainability in jeopardy.

Purpose/mission

To improve the quality of life and functional capability of the UK working age population

Critical success factors

Establish a co-ordinated collaborative approach within existing organisations to provide strategic oversight to enhance the synergy, effectiveness and efficiency of the existing academic base, with existing organisations and provide advice about growth of the necessary resources

- advise on the development of new professional people and systems

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- identify with healthcare, workplaces, policy makers, and workers the research questions which need answered
- liaise closely with UKRI and other funders to advise on the appropriate targeting of research
- identify the people requirements for delivery
- support the relevant objectives of CSF 2

in order to:

1. Grow the evidence base on the push/pull factors in relation to work participation, avoidable work disability, and on the interventions, which work

- increase research of the right quality and greatest impact on the factors which reduce work related functional capability and work participation in the UK
- increase research to identify interventions that work
- through implementation science improve understand what works for different populations and settings and why (the necessary features of effective implementation of interventions)

2. Advise policy makers, industry and other key stakeholders on how to provide access to work related advice and support for the whole of the working age population

- develop knowledge mobilisation principles and techniques
- explore and evaluate the utility of existing UK and comparative international models
- agree the definition of what is Work and who should be included
- develop low cost agile range of interventions e.g. from individually targeted to much more complex interventions (e.g. agency or employer targeted) which where possible utilise existing agencies
- identify people requirements for effective service delivery and reverse the decline in the relevant professions
- develop competences of new professional people (NPP) and disciplines which are fit for purpose to achieve the mission (e.g. OH Technicians, Bio- psychosocial case managers, etc.)
- enhance the skills as necessary in existing professional groups (e.g. ensure that Associated Health professionals e.g. Physio, Occupational Therapy, Podiatry, Psychology, have appropriate experience of the wide variety of workplaces and work organisation etc.)
- establish return to work and or maximal functional capability as a priority health outcome measure
- ensure there is an expansion of existing provision within OH and health and work, so public and commercial providers are fit for the future

3. Systematically measure performance as we progress towards fulfilling the mission

- Agree validated performance measures of our people's Quality of Life and Functional Capability e.g. EQ5D and workability
- Agree integrated measures for public sector performance

Description of proposed organisational structure

- hub and spoke model
- guided by an Advisory Board which includes academics policy makers, social partners, public, patient and worker involvement to ensure co- production
- led by a management group who will maximise efficiency and synergy across the voluntarily participating groups, units, departments and agencies

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- funded by public and private sources. E.g. UKRI, DWP, industry, trade unions, industry and sectoral associations, philanthropy, the public.

Funding for the work of the Centre will require:

- Infrastructure funding for the Centre, primarily for staff of the Centre. This could also include supporting several PhD students for which spoke members of the Centre may bid.
- Project/programme grant support for research proposals, awarded in open competition through peer review by Research Councils, NIHR, charities, industry etc. Future research capacity will be enhanced by a clear career trajectory supported by sustainable funding. This would probably be best achieved in the first instance by focused calls for research in relevant areas.

Drafted by the Academic Forum for work and health project working group, Chaired by Professor Sir Mansel Aylward. 28th November 2019

Annex 1

About the Academic Forum for health and work

<https://www.som.org.uk/research-and-academic-forum>

This is a nonaligned and multidisciplinary forum for academic organisations. Established in 2000, its Chair is Professor Ewan Macdonald. The Forum is calling for an independent Academic Centre for Work and Health to promote, protect and improve the health of the UK's working people or those wanting to get into work. The Centre would deliver real, practical and applied outputs to help keep workers healthy, offer a non-Governmental voice that will support to develop more efficient and effective workplace health strategies and help change the way we think and act in terms of health in the workplace. The Forum offers Buddy Support to fellow researchers who are moving into Academic Research in this area or wish to progress their Academic Career.

The Forum is currently hosted and supported by The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM). SOM publishes the journal of *Occupational Medicine* and is financially sustainable via its 1700 members, (who are occupational health professionals). The SOM leads advocacy on workplace health – being a member of the Government's occupational health expert group, in regular dialogue with the Government's work and health unit, and its three Patrons (Lord Blunkett, Dame Carol Black and Norman Lamb, MP). As well as the An Academic Forum, the SOM hosts the MSK at work network (which include representatives from professional bodies and charities etc) and a GP and other special interest groups. SOM also hosts policy relevant expert round tables on key issues e.g. on the gig economy and sleep. The SOM hosts an information area on its website- which provides information to Employers, Health professionals and the public.

We would welcome support and comments on this initiative.

Nick Pahl | CEO Nick.pahl@som.org.uk

SOM 2 St Andrews Place | London | NW1 4LB Tel 0203 9104537

To be sent to all members of the SOM and FOM