



Occupational health organisations welcome consultation to improve workplace health

15th July 2019

Leading occupational health (OH) organisations have today welcomed the launch of the Government's consultation on improving health at work alongside proposed changes to improve statutory sick pay. The Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) and the Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) welcome the focus this consultation brings to the importance of quality OH services, amongst measures to secure improved employee health, and productivity, particularly enabling those with long term health conditions and disabilities to remain in work if they wish to do so.

The consultation recognises the lack of access to occupational health (OH) services, which are currently provided only to around half of all employees. The consultation focuses on steps to build capacity and rapid access to modern occupational health advice.

The consultation proposes to consult on ways to increase the number of employees who access occupational health services with a suggested

- increase in the capacity of occupational health professionals, particularly doctors and nurses; there is a serious shortage of specialists in occupational medicine; in the NHS alone, numbers of consultants have declined from 80 to 60 over the past two years
- review in the ways in which the quality of OH services are measured and monitored (building on the work of the SEQOHS quality improvement process)
- consultation on the co-ordination and funding of academic research to provide answers to key questions related to workplace health.

SOM and FOM welcome the recognition that occupational health professionals are uniquely placed to enhance the productivity of the nation while keeping workers healthy and safe¹.

Dr Will Ponsonby, President of the Society of Occupational Medicine said: "*We welcome these proposals to invest in occupational health. It makes sense to facilitate investment in occupational health for small businesses and we urge the Government to invest in occupational health professionals to allow this scale up to occur. We will continue to work collaboratively with the Government with the aim of ensuring that new OH services are appropriately designed and funded.*"

Dr Anne de Bono, President of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine said: "*For the past few years, we have engaged in constructive dialogue with Government as they developed plans for this consultation. We support the consultation's emphasis on investment in training in occupational medicine, which is desperately needed to provide the quality OH offer to employees that our workplaces require. Employee health and wellbeing contributes to successful business performance and we know that highly effective companies commit to a culture of health.*"

¹ Health, work and wellbeing – evidence and research
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/health-work-and-wellbeing-evidence-and-research>

Notes to editors:

About the FOM - The Faculty of Occupational Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians is the professional and educational standard setting body for occupational medicine in the United Kingdom with a mission statement 'to drive improvement in the health of the working age population through outstanding occupational health capability by developing and supporting the good practice of occupational medicine'.

About the SOM - The Society of Occupational Medicine is the largest nationally recognised professional organisation for individuals with an interest in health and work. SOM acts as a national voice for occupational health, engaging with government and policy makers to increase awareness of the role of occupational health. Our Patrons are Lord Blunkett, Dame Carol Black and Sir Norman Lamb, MP.

Core functions of an OH service are:

- Prevention of ill health caused or exacerbated by work
- Timely intervention, facilitating easy and early treatment of the main causes of sickness absence
- Rehabilitation to help staff stay at work or return to work after illness
- Health assessments for work supporting organisations to manage attendance, retirement and related matters
- Promotion of health and wellbeing using work as a means of improving health and wellbeing and using the workplace to promote health
- Teaching and training promoting the health and wellbeing approach amongst staff and managers

Statistics and evidence:

- The UK has a rapidly aging workforce, related to increased life expectancy and the rising pensionable age; 40% of 50-64 year olds have at least one chronic disease or disability. The health benefits of good work, with reasonable adjustments where necessary for those with long term health conditions or disability, will assist people to re-skill and remain economically active. Good work is good for health and for national prosperity. Quality OH services can play a major role in this
- 175 million working days are lost to sickness absence every year
- 300,000 people every year fall out of work through sickness and find themselves on benefits; costing the country £13 billion a year on health-related benefits, over and above the £121 billion spend on the National Health Service
- Employers face an annual bill of £9 billion on sick pay with poor employee health is associated with significant costs to employers
- A key benefit of occupational health interventions is avoided sick leave and significant savings to a range of employer's direct and indirect costs providing more financial and especially tax incentives would encourage more employers to invest in employee health and wellbeing
- The costs of ill health and absence from work are unsustainable for individuals, businesses and governments and need to be seen as a fundamental part of solving the "productivity puzzle".²

OH and the NHS

The consultation does not cover NHS OH provision and both SOM and FOM are also calling for core OH functions to be provided to all NHS staff to standards recommended by NHS Employers, which meet SEQOHS accreditation but have never been enforced by NHS England or mentioned in the Interim People Plan.

Both SOM and FOM believe that all healthcare professionals should recognise the important interaction between good work and good health, strive to achieve return to work as an outcome of good clinical care and recognise when their patients could benefit from specialist occupational health advice. We believe that an understanding of the interaction between good work and good health for individuals and communities should be built into every stage of medical education and training, and be a fundamental in the curriculum delivered to all student health and social care professionals.

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