

Issue 98: New advice on managing the long-term sick

NICE issues public guidance on the management of long-term sickness absence and incapacity for work

Quote

"We have to move from illness to wellness. Businesses will have to invest in wellness. There is no choice. It's not philanthropy. It's enlightened self interest."

Shrinivas M Shanbhag,
Medical Adviser, Reliance
Industries

Background

Hot on the heels of Dame Carol Black's landmark review of the health of Britain's working age population, the Department of Health asked the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) to develop guidelines on the management of long-term sickness absence. The result is public health guidance no. 19 'Managing long-term sickness and incapacity for work' which was published in March 2009. It contains important guidance for employers looking to manage and improve their sickness absence processes and reduce costs.

Overview

Although there are some caveats in the NICE analysis, mainly due to the scarcity of admissible research in the field of long-term employment absence, NICE has four recommendations which it concludes are "cost effective" to implement. Three of these recommendations relate directly to best practice for employers when managing employees on long-term absence, particularly those with mental health or musculoskeletal disorders. The fourth recommendation relates to activities for those who are unemployed and in receipt of incapacity benefit (or other similar benefits such as employment and support allowance [ESA]).

The three recommendations for employers are explained briefly below.

Recommendation 1: initial enquiries

NICE recommends that within 12 weeks, and ideally within 2-6 weeks of an employee starting absence, the employer should initiate enquiries into the reason for absence and potential for return to work. In our opinion, even two weeks might be too late. Given that the enquiry might only result in action a number of days later, we believe that earlier intervention (through an enquiry) is appropriate. Our experience suggests that day one absence monitoring, supported by appropriate interventions for individuals with defined conditions, can result in net gains for an employer.

The employer's enquiry would determine what action is required to assist with the rehabilitation and return to work of the absent employee.

Recommendation 2: detailed assessment

The outcome of the initial enquiry might be a more detailed investigation. NICE is keen to point out that these detailed case assessments do not have to be carried out by clinically qualified individuals, but a demonstration of impartiality is critical for the employee to have confidence in the process. Where clinical input is required, referral to the appropriate specialist with occupational health knowledge is recommended. A multidisciplinary approach may be necessary to ensure all issues are covered.

Where appropriate, a return-to-work plan should be developed, detailing the level, type and frequency of interventions and services including psychological support.

Recommendation 3: interventions and services

NICE recommends that the employer should coordinate and support the delivery of any planned health, occupational or rehabilitation intervention and any return-to-work plan. This may be provided by a 'case worker' (or case manager), by an Occupational Health team or directly by the employer.

The intensity of the intervention should vary according to circumstances – those with a poor prognosis for returning to work should be given more intensive interventions and services. A lighter touch is advocated for those with a good prognosis.

NICE also recommends that the case worker coordinates the referrals and delivery of the required interventions and services.

For psychological conditions, interventions should be evidence based and delivered by suitably trained and experienced practitioners. This is an area we have highlighted to many clients – noting the importance of using Stress Vocational Rehabilitation to address psychological issues, rather than relying on the physiological approach most often deployed by Occupational Health providers.

NICE goes so far as to suggest that offering problem solving and coping strategies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) will benefit both employer and employee. CBT is a psychological treatment where people work with a therapist to look at how their problems, thoughts, feelings and behaviour fit together; it can help people to challenge negative thoughts and change any behaviour that causes problems.

What does this mean for you?

NICE recommends early intervention by an employer to manage employees who are absent. It concludes that a sophisticated programme of employee support, focused on getting the employee healthy and back to work is in the best interests of both employer and employee.

Many employers have begun to recognise the productivity impact that absence, both short and long, can have on their organisation. However, few will have developed absence management policies and procedures that meet the NICE requirements. The enlightened few, who have recognised that it is to their advantage to manage health risks, are already enjoying productivity advantages over their competitors.

Next steps

We recommend that companies take the opportunity to measure the potential beneficial impact of absence management strategies on organisational productivity and efficiency. Using Hewitt's unique approach to the evaluation of health expenditure in an organisation, we are able to demonstrate objectively the financial benefits of such interventions. Our Total Health Management approach provides a framework within which interventions can be structured and significant savings can be made.

If you have any questions on this Spotlight, if you would like to know more about the NICE recommendations or the Hewitt approach to managing health-related risks please contact your usual Hewitt contact or [James Kenrick](mailto:James.Kenrick@hewitt.com) (+44 (0) 1372 733125).

If you would like to receive these bulletins by e-mail, please contact spotlight.enquiries@hewitt.com.