Effective absence management

Dear Sir,

Roelen and Groothof [1] have argued that the rigorous management of sickness absence may be counterproductive. This argument is flawed and does not properly reflect the evidence on which they have commented.

The suggestion that presenteeism today is associated with absenteeism tomorrow is based on two reports of the same study by Bergstrom et al. [2] The original researchers recognized the limitations of their research. For example noting ‘the high rate of sick leave in Sweden ... [where] ... approximately 14% of everyone in the age group 20 to 64 years ... were receiving either sickness benefits or a disability pension on an ordinary weekday’. They made tentative conclusions ‘that some measures ... if they lead to an increase in [presenteeism] may ... increase sick leave’. The original researchers’ own measured comments are in stark contrast to the conclusion drawn by Roelen and Groothof.

Importantly, Bergstrom et al. did not measure presenteeism—the lost productivity that occurs when employees come to work ill and perform below par because of that illness [3]—they measured beliefs about health and when absence might be justified by (ill)health. Bergstrom et al. showed only that those people in Sweden whose perception of their own health meant they thought they could have taken time off work at least five times this year might be absent more often in the future. They did not investigate the rigour of attendance management.

Reduced productivity due to reduced health at work is important but its impact has not been fully established [4]. Effective measures are available to promote wellbeing in the workplace and to help absent workers resume work [5,6].

Presenteeism should not be used as a justification for not managing attendance rigorously. There is no evidence to support this contention. Presenteeism is a justification only for supporting workers with health needs at work and for trying to change the false beliefs about capability of those workers.

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References


