

Sickness absence: Return to work interviews

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The current situation with COVID-19 and the need to self-isolate (if exposed) has obviously affected staff absence. In the best of times managing sickness absence has to be done delicately, these are not the best of times. Still, one method that remains useful is to have a return to work meeting with an employee when they come back from an absence.

Of course, pandemic arrangements mean that you need to carry out risk assessments on all employees anyway, paying particular attention to any ongoing effects of COVID-19. It is advised that practices carry out a daily screening for staff as well.

A return to work meeting is usually held on the first day of an employee's return from a period of sickness or other absence. The meeting is to find out the reason for the absence and ensure that the employee is fit to return to work. It is an important component of monitoring absence levels. This meeting should be conducted sympathetically and take the format of an informal interview. The discussion should be confidential so ensure you use a private room without any distractions.

Welcome the employee back to work. Show concern and offer support to the employee after their sickness. Confirm why they have been absent (they should have been keeping you informed during their absence in any case – a written sickness policy helps set out these expectations). Is the employee fit to return to work? Inform the employee of any staff changes or other practice matters which may have occurred while they were away from the practice.

Plan what information you may want to find out and what messages you might want to get across to the member of staff returning to work, as shown in Box 1. Find out if the employee's sickness is work related. If so, are there any health and safety issues you need to address? Discuss any help you can provide to ease the employee's return to work. Use the opportunity to gently inquire whether there were any other problems the employee has been having either at work or at home that may have contributed to the absence. You will need to be sensitive and tactful in how you question the employee around these issues. Asking questions in a sensitive, supportive and tactful way may allow you to explore with the employee if there are any other issues that are contributing to their absence levels. Problems that emerge may be a sick relative, unhappiness at work due to either workload or their relationship with another colleague.

Some ongoing health concerns may be classed as a disability. Disability discrimination rules might apply in those circumstances and you would have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the employee's disability.

Although these discussions should be informal and brief, it is important to take notes and keep them. For uncertified absence of up to seven days you should give the employee a sickness self-certification form to complete so that you have a written record of why they said they were absent.

Sometimes you may suspect that the employee was not genuinely sick but do not make assumptions until you have had a detailed discussion with them. Unauthorised absence would count as misconduct but you need to investigate and find evidence before you can start formal disciplinary proceedings against an employee. If your employee has frequent short-term sick leave discuss any patterns you have noticed in the

Box 1 Return-to-work interviews are to:

- Welcome the employee back
- Ensure they are fully fit to return to work
- Identify reasons for absence
- Clarify whether there are any problems in the workplace causing or contributing to the absence
- Find out if any workplace adjustments are needed to help the employee return to work
- Inform the employee about any workplace changes that have occurred during their absence

employee's absences, say regular sickness on Mondays. Ask if they have sought medical advice for their problems. Maybe ask if you can have their permission to contact their doctor for an in-depth medical report. Suggest regular review meetings to discuss attendance.

Although one of the essential elements of a return to work interview is its informality, it is accepted that in certain circumstances individuals may wish to be accompanied by a colleague. This should only be in a few cases, but you should try to accommodate this request.

Discussing absence when an employee returns to work meetings is one of the most effective interventions to manage short term absence. It is legitimate for an employer to ask why someone was not in work and it provides a structured base for communication. ♦

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