A position statement from NHS Health at Work

Occupational Health Provision for General Practitioners and others working in NHS funded primary care settings

Occupational health is an important service for all NHS staff. NHS Health at Work, the network of occupational health teams in the NHS, believes that all those working in Primary Care should receive the same overall provision as their colleagues in secondary care.

GPs and other staff employed in GP practices and other NHS settings in primary care (for example dentists and optometrists and their teams) should be able to access consistent, high quality occupational health services whenever they need it.

Occupational health is a specialised clinical service that provides clear benefits to staff and patients, as well as contributing to the productivity of an organisation as an investment in the wellbeing of the workforce. Where NHS organisations prioritise staff health and wellbeing, performance is enhanced, patient care improves, staff retention is higher and sickness absence is lower. Access to good occupational health support improves staff engagement and can contribute to cultural change – factors that were highlighted as essential in the Francis report following the events in Mid Staffordshire. For the NHS to be effective we need to recognise, value and reward the contribution made by staff and ensure that they are healthy, well and looked after.

GPs and other primary care staff work in difficult and complex conditions that are full of risk. Occupational health specialists bring a unique understanding of all of the specific health issues affecting healthcare workers. For example, occupational health will provide prompt, impartial and confidential advice regarding exposure to blood borne viruses particularly following a needle stick injury. If a GP is facing stress or ‘burn out’ they need access to a specialist who understands the specific and distinctive pressures that they may be facing and can unpick the issues and offer timely support.

Similarly, if a GP develops a health issue (such as cancer or multiple sclerosis), which may affect their ability to work, occupational health doctors offer specialist advice about returning to work and modifying their practice. This offers vital support to the GP as an individual and also helps the NHS to remain an effective provider of healthcare.

GPs should not manage each other’s health or that of their practice staff.

Enabling staff to stay healthy means they can in turn deliver the best possible care to patients – we need to ensure that high quality occupational health services are available to all GPs irrespective of region.

In 2001, the DH issued national guidance titled ‘The provision of OH and Safety Services for General Medical Practitioners and their staff’. This included the range of functions and services that should be provided, the delivery standards and guidance for commissioning. The NHS Plan stated that there should be full occupational health provision for ALL staff. No guidance has been issued to supersede this.

The NHS Health at Work Network is pleased that NHS England is continuing to centrally fund some elements of occupational health services to GP’s but would urge NHS England to make it a requirement for general practice to invest in occupational health services for their staff at an agreed minimum level.