

Providing occupational health services for GPs and their staff in Leicester and Leicestershire

University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust (UHL) has been providing an OH service for GPs in Leicestershire for 20 years. This was a pioneering approach at the time and is still in the vanguard of innovative OHWB service provision. From the outset, one of the key drivers has been to provide GPs and practice staff with the same access to OH services as staff working in larger NHS organisations.

When initially set up, senior OH nurses from the service visited the 150 practices across the city and the borough to carry out assessments for staff, work with the GP practices to understand workplace risk and support the process of risk assessment for all staff. This approach has been sustained, despite changes in national specifications and commissioning arrangements, with funding prioritised by the local CCG to respond to local demand. From the outset, the service has been valued amongst the local primary care community, with high levels of demand via self and management referral and very low-levels of 'opt-out' from the service contract. UHL OH service has also worked with the practitioner health programme for primary care, promoting the correlation between workplace factors and performance and assisting practitioners to remain in practice.

The benefits of this approach became even clearer during the pandemic. At the start of pandemic, the UHL OH team's remit to urgently develop and support the risk assessment process naturally included those in primary care. This provided a unique whole-system view of staff at higher risk across Leicester and Leicestershire and its insight proved vital to the national work developing a national risk reduction framework for NHS staff at risk of COVID-19 infection. Bespoke advice and information were also provided to those local practices with staff at higher risk.

The UHL team tracked the impact of the provision of OH services to GPs over nearly 20 years, noting and sharing some of the unique OHWB challenges faced by primary care providers, as well as common causes of workplace risk, across the wider NHS knowledge base. As well as ensuring GP staff are kept well and safe, there has been significant skills transfer between OH professionals and the primary care community in Leicester and Leicestershire. This has taken the form of more practices feeling confident to carry out workplace risk assessments, reflecting a wider understanding of OH and workplace risk factors. Research has also shown that there are key benefits provided by extended OH consultations by general practitioners, which can achieve positive self-reported outcomes for patients in employment. The GPs of Leicester and Leicestershire, with a deeper understanding of OH, have fostered years of collaborative working with the UHL OH team and have been pioneers in this area.