

Occupational Health

Get it Right - PUBLIC HEALTH PUBLIC SERVICE

Occupational Health (OH) Nurses are a cornerstone of public health and make a valuable contribution to the Welsh economy, by enabling organisations from the public, private and voluntary sector in the prevention of ill health from work and to improve the health and wellbeing of employees. Generally work is a health enhancing activity and OH Nurses work with employers and employees to ensure that the health gain of being in employment is maximised, within a safe environment.

Within Wales access to occupational health services tends to be fragmented and limited to the large employers both public and private, rather than the small to medium enterprises where the majority of employees are employed. Referral to OH is still often regarded by both employees and management as a punishment and this role needs to be changed. The service could for example ensure fast tracking of common health problems (psychological; musculo-skeletal etc) through the NHS in order to expedite a rapid return to work.

OH Nurses also have a unique role in supporting those out of work through illness or disability back into the workplace. Greater linkage between Jobcentre Plus, Long term Conditioning Programmes and Occupational Health would facilitate a smooth transition back into the workplace. This would bring wide benefits for individuals, and their families, to Welsh business and the wider economy and social stability of Wales.

In addition supporting the education of occupational health nurses to develop contemporary skills such as an introduction to cognitive behaviour therapy, will equip them with the ability to respond to the needs of the rapidly changing workforce. Occupational health nurses have a key role to play in advising organisations about the need to address the root causes of work related problems such as stress, rather than promoting tertiary interventions such as counselling or providing subsidised gym membership.

RCN Wales believes that the Primary Care workforce, especially general practice, has a key role to play in supporting the health of the working age population, particularly in their 'first contact' role. It is therefore, recommended that each general practice have access to dedicated OH provision for specialist support. RCN Wales believes that an occupational health nurse based in a Well-being Centre or GP surgery could:

- receive regional referrals and co-ordinate with GPs in each area to work together on health management
- act as centres of excellence for local business community for advice and referrals where possible building up relationships with these
- disseminate information about national health campaigns to encourage uptake within workplaces

In July 2009 the report of the One Wales Occupational Health Task and Finish Group was published. Its central recommendation was that a national occupational health service, provided by the NHS and made viable by contributions from employers, should be established. The Minister for Health and Social Services accepted this recommendation and RCN Wales believes it should now be implemented.

KEY POLICY ACTION

- Implementation of the recommendations of the One Wales Occupational Health Task and Finish Group.

