Government support package aims to cut sickness absence

The UK government has launched a new initiative to tackle illness at work, which costs the economy an estimated £100bn a year.

The new advice, developed jointly by Public Health England (PHE) and health and wellbeing services provider Healthy Working Futures (formerly the Fit For Work Team), aims to help employers promote good health.

The guidance includes information on carrying out a workplace health needs assessment (HNA) – a series of questions that staff answer anonymously. Businesses can use the findings to tailor activities to improve health and wellbeing.

HNA questions cover areas such as smoking, healthy eating, alcohol, physical activity and sleep. There is an additional section for line managers, who “have a key role in promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace”, the Workplace Health Needs Assessment [1] document says.

The supplementary questions aim to find out the level of line manager competence and confidence in dealing with health and wellbeing. Those who lack the required knowledge should receive additional training, such as mental health awareness, the new guidance recommends.

Repeating the survey every year would help to show the difference made by the activities that have been implemented.

The tool for carrying out HNAs can be used by employers of all sizes, however PHE said it would be mostly beneficial to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which account for 60% of private sector employment. It said that, unlike most big employers, SMEs are less likely to have health programmes.

According to government figures, the UK’s workforce takes about 137.3 million days of sick leave each year and
about 330,000 people become unemployed due to health-related issues.

Successful workplace programmes that encourage exercise, a balanced diet and stopping smoking have been found to return between £2 and £10 for every £1 spent.

Duncan Selbie, PHE chief executive, said: “Sickness absence and tackling early retirement due to ill health are still major challenges for the economy. We must do more to improve health outcomes, and in turn the health and economic productivity of the country. I urge employers to take advantage of this support.”

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