



## A Practice Information Sheet for GPs and Primary Care Practitioners

### Improving Mental Health Outcomes Through Sustained Employment

The focus of this Information Sheet is on how to provide support to those patients who are in work but who present with symptoms that may indicate an underlying mental health problem which could affect their ability to maintain their present work and associated duties. This Information Sheet concentrates on raising awareness and knowledge of GPs and primary care team members in terms of:

- Assessing a patient's work status and potential to retain employment;
- How to source information for use by the practice and the patient on options and resources available to them to retain and improve the patient's wellbeing in a work setting;
- How the 'Statement of Fitness for Work' (the 'Fit Note') can be used to support the patient in their return to work (and so retain their employment) and thus minimise the ill-effects of worklessness.

This Information Sheet follows the briefing document issued to all practices in June 2010 which emphasised the importance of sustained employment in order to achieve good mental health and wellbeing outcomes for patients.

DWP published a guide for GPs in February 2010 on the 'Statement of Fitness for Work' arrangements and in that commented:

*'Evidence shows that work is therapeutic and helps promote recovery and rehabilitation. Equally, unemployment is generally harmful to health and can lead to increased morbidity and poorer physical and mental health, as well as poverty and social exclusion. Much sickness absence is due to mild or moderate mental ill health or musculoskeletal or cardio respiratory conditions. The effects of these conditions can often be accommodated at work, with appropriate adjustments, adaptations or support if necessary. Employers have a crucial role in achieving this; however they need advice on the functional effects of the condition to do so.'*

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(1) When you are assessing an individual's mental health you need to consider their work status. Useful questions to ask a patient are:

Are you in work at present?

If 'yes' then consider asking:

- what is your job?
- what does your job entail?

If 'no' then:

- what is preventing you from working?

*Note: It must be emphasised to the patient, during the consultation, that the asking of these questions does not constitute a 'Fitness for Work' interview.*

#### Key messages for primary care about work and its link to the individual's physical and mental health

- Always consider the possibility of an occupational link.
- A missed occupational diagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment; the patient may not improve until the work link is recognised and any casual factors are removed.
- Patients do not always make the link between their work and their symptoms.
- Using some simple questions during a consultation may assist in determining whether there is an occupational link.

#### Key principles of effective rehabilitation and promoting a return to work (job retention) are:

- Recognising what the patient can do rather than what they cannot do.
- Intervene early; this maximises both health and employment outcomes.

**Key principles of effective rehabilitation and promoting a return to work (job retention) are:**

*(Continued)*

- Provide brief therapeutic interventions (e.g. counselling) as these are effective for employees experiencing job-related distress, particularly where these focus on problem identification and solving. The benefits of CBT are equal to those of medication in the short-term and provide greater efficacy in the long term.
- Consider patient support and engagement with the patient's employer. Communicating with the employer or occupational health service either directly or, where available, through an employment advisor will enable a more timely and successful return to work.
- Considering what simple alterations might support an early return to work.
- Ensure the entire primary care team understand the benefits of work to health and alter their practice accordingly.

**(2) Sourcing and using information; the main reference for GPs and health professionals is:**

**Healthy Working Wales**

Go to ([www.healthyworkingwales.com](http://www.healthyworkingwales.com)) and then click on the 'enter site' link in the 'Healthy Working Wales' box—*health and work advice for GPs and health professionals.*

This site has been developed in collaboration with the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine and Society of Occupational Medicine.

This website provides GPs and other primary healthcare professionals timely access to information, training and decision aids to support the management of health and work.

Examples of information resources available on the **Healthy Working Wales** website:

- A free to access website - 'Work Life' - produced to help people with long-term fluctuating health conditions to remain in work.
- 'Work Life' is aimed at three key audiences -
  - i. Employers
  - ii. Employees
  - iii. Healthcare professionals

Information is focused on helping people to stay in work, and lead an independent lifestyle. It brings together examples of best practice, guidance for employers, employees and healthcare professionals, research and case studies from across the employment sector and from around the internet into one dedicated, free to access portal.

- Click on 'View Learning Resources' link, on the home page, to access the Health e-Working (Primary Care) resource for e learning modules on:
  - i. Making the Occupational Link
  - ii. Advising on Fitness for Work and Supporting Rehabilitation
  - iii. The Implications for GPs of the Equality Act (2010)
  - iv. Worklessness and Unemployment
  - v. Difficult Decisions Assessing Fitness for Work
  - vi. Communications, Relationships and Trust
- Click on 'Websites, Leaflets, and Guidance' tab to access information for download, which is suitable for patients and health professionals.
- 'Health at Work' Advice Line provides health professionals with easy access to professional occupational health advice over the telephone.

**'Health at Work Advice Line for Wales'**  
**free for GPs**  
**telephone number 0800 107 0900**  
**(Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)**

**WaMH in PC is working to improve primary care mental health by nurturing trust • good communication • person centredness**

**WaMH in PC**

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### 3) How the 'Statement of Fitness for Work' (the 'Fit Note') can be used to support the patient in their return to work

Again, Go to [www.healthyworkingwales.com](http://www.healthyworkingwales.com)

The 'Fit Note' has been designed to help GPs provide more information to their patients and employers about the functional effects of their condition.

Useful references on the website include:

- Click on 'Fit for Work Decision Aids' link, on the home page, for information and guidance which can be used during consultations to help and support GPs make decisions when filling out the 'Statement of Fitness for Work' or 'Fit Note' .

*The decision aid about completing the fit note is available as an app as well as online.*

- The 'Fit Note Guide' and 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ Written by Prof Sayeed Khan and Dr Debbie Cohen).

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In an article published in the BMJ in December 2010 entitled 'Assessing fitness for work and writing a Fit Note', Prof. David Coggan and Prof Keith Palmer provide comment on 'what determines fitness for work'; 'assessing fitness for work'; completing a Fit Note' and 'allowing for a patient's attitudes and expectations'.  
(BMJ 2010;341:c6305) .

In the commentary on 'completing a Fit Note' examples are given of modifications that may help a patient to return to work that can be entered on the form in the section: 'if available, and with your employers agreement, you may benefit from:...' and the four criteria:

**Phased return to work**—the patient could restart with reduced working hours and build up gradually to normal levels. Working fewer hours each day is usually preferable to fewer days each week.

#### Acknowledgements:



Royal College of  
General Practitioners

**Altered hours**—consider the time of work as well as the number of hours each day; for example, a patient recovering from depression may find early starts especially difficult.

**Amended duties**—changes in the organisation of work might help; an anxious patient with reduced confidence may benefit from working in a team rather than alone; a patient with anxiety or depression may need to avoid tight deadlines.

**Workplace adaptation**—changes to aspects of a work station may be necessary to improve comfort.

#### WaMH in PC Gold Standard Library

*WaMH in PC are developing easily recognisable, valuable information, training and support tools for primary care mental health which we trust you will find informative whilst encouraging you to explore the issues in greater detail.*

*Below is a list of education /support packages developed and released so far as part of the Gold Standard programme of work:*

- **Information Sheet 1, entitled 'Improving Mental Health Outcomes through Sustained Employment'**
- **Training DVD, entitled 'Getting it Right' - Dealing with Mental Health in Primary Care**
- **Information Sheet 2, entitled 'The Impact of Emotional Distress on Health'**
- **Information Sheet 3, entitled 'Positive Choices Suicide Prevention Training Framework'**
- **Information Sheet 4, entitled 'Mental Health and Housing'**
- **Information Sheet 5, entitled 'Mental Health and Parkinsons'**

*All of the above are available on the WaMH in PC website*

[www.wamhipc.org.uk](http://www.wamhipc.org.uk)