New ways of working: the use of telephone consultations in the management of sickness absence: a descriptive study

Dr Paula Devlin, 2009

ABSTRACT

Aims and Objectives: To assess whether telephone consultation is a suitable tool for Occupational Health (OH) practitioners in the assessment of managerial referral for sickness absence, and whether telephone consultation is more suitable for the management of some diagnoses than others.

To explore the attitudes of OH and Human Resources (HR) staff to telephone consultations, and the level of employee’s satisfaction with OH services when delivered by telephone.

Background: The UK has approximately 1700 practising occupational health physicians (OHP) and employees’ access to an OHP is estimated at 12% of the general working population. Transfer of tasks traditionally associated with doctors to other health professionals and alternatives to face to face consultations need to be considered.

Methods: Data were collected over a 6 month period from employees referred to the OH department of a large UK retail sector employer for assessment of sickness absence by telephone consultation. Follow up postal questionnaire was used to assess employee satisfaction with OH services delivered by telephone consultation, and semi-structured qualitative interviews to assess attitudes of OH and HR staff to telephone consultations.

Results: The majority of referrals were for mental health or musculoskeletal problems. There was a higher non-attendance rate for mental health problems. Consultations for mental health problems took longer than for physical conditions. Benefits of telephone consultation were reported as time and convenience, the main disadvantage being the inability to undertake a physical examination. Respondents to the satisfaction questionnaire reported good levels of satisfaction with the OH service.

Conclusion: Telephone consultation is a suitable tool for OH practitioners in the assessment of managerial referrals for long-term sickness absence.
Further research is advised to assess whether the use of telephone consultation is more suitable for mental health than physical conditions and economically beneficial to employers.

Additional skills are required when consulting by telephone and appropriate training should be provided for OH professionals.