The effects of mental illness declared at pre-employment on subsequent work attendance: a study of NCH employees’ sickness absence

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ABSTRACT

Aims: The main aim of the study was to examine whether employees who suffer or had suffered with mental illness, declared on their pre employment health questionnaires, are likely to have higher rates of sickness absence than employees who declared no current or past illness. The study also compared the rate of dropping out of employment between the two groups.

The study also aimed to compare the sickness absence rates and the rate of dropping out of employment of employees who declared current or history of musculoskeletal problems, to those who declared no illness, as background information.

Methods: The study was a longitudinal retrospective cohort study. Three cohorts of employees were chosen from the pre employment health questionnaires of the employees who joined NCH on permanent contracts between 01/01/2002 and 31/12/2002. Employees who declared history of mental illness (179) were chosen as cases. A sample of 200 employees was selected as the control group from the health questionnaires of those who declared no history of any illness. Those who declared history of musculoskeletal disorders (149) were selected as the third cohort. The sickness absence records for the years 2002 to 2005 were obtained for the three groups from the employer’s database.

Sickness absence, in days and spells, as well as the cause of each spell of sickness absence were determined. The year of leaving employment was also determined for those who left employment with NCH from the three groups.

Results: Results showed employees in the mental illness group had significantly higher levels of sickness absence days and sickness absence spells than the no illness group. Mental illness was the main cause of spells for the mental illness group, while it caused very little sickness absence among the two other groups. The mental illness group also had more spells of sickness absence caused by other medical conditions than the two other groups apart from in 2003 when this was exceeded by the musculoskeletal group. The group also showed higher rate of leaving employment than the two other groups, however the rate was not found to be statistically significant (apart from in 2003) due to the generally low numbers that left employment.