Retiring natures: medical aspects of ill health retirement in firefighters in Grampian

Dr Euan Thompson, 2005

ABSTRACT

There has been much interest recently on the issue of ill-health retirement (IHR) of public sector workers.

Research has been published on the ill-health retirement patterns of wholetime firefighters in the UK, and the sickness absence patterns of the wholetime and retained groups. However, no research in ill-health retirement has been performed on retained firefighters, a subgroup of the Brigade living in more remote areas where there is no need for full-time firefighters.

This study looked at these individuals’ patterns of exiting work, and found that a markedly lower proportion of the retained group take ill-health retirement compared to the wholetime group. In addition it has been shown that the wholetime firefighters have a large increase in the rate of ill-health retirement coinciding with the length of service needed to achieve maximum benefits under their pension scheme. There would appear to be no obvious medical reason for this, and that ill-health retirement-seeking behavior appears to be influenced by non-medical factors.

In addition there appear to be differences between the groups in the medical reason underlying the ill-health retirement; with a much higher proportion of the retained group’s IHR’s having injury as the cause: in comparison, back pain and mental health problems feature more prominently in the wholetime group.

The remainder of the study discusses possible causes for these findings, and concludes that the pension scheme afforded to the wholetime group is likely to have had an effect on their IHR-seeking behaviour. Predictors of the likelihood of IHR appear to be largely non-medical, being length of service and employment group (wholetime or retained).