The effect of an occupational health service training course on managers’ referral behaviour for long-term sickness absence

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Assess the impact of an Occupational Health Service (OHS) training course on manager’s referral behaviour for sickness absence.

Methods: A retrospective cohort study was conducted using 38 managers that had attended the course and 76 matched controls that were managers in similar roles but had not attended. Data was collected on the absentees under their management responsibility for a period of 6 months before and after attending. Numbers of referrals, times from start of absence to referral and quality of information given on a standard company referral form were assessed to see if there were any significant changes following the course.

Results: There were a total of 47 absentees managed by those attending the course (22 pre-course and 25 post-course) and 25 in the control group. Of these one third were referred during their absence and a further third were sent to the OHS on the day they wished to return to work. The remainder were not seen by the OHS. The mean time (weeks) to referral was 6.7 pre-course, 7.7 post-course and 24.8 in the control group. A survival curve was plotted but the differences were non-significant (p-values 0.30-0.75). The assessment of the referral form resulted in a mean score of 14.6 pre-course, 23.6 post course and 19.4 in the control group. The results were significant (p-values 0.005 and 0.0028).

Conclusions: The study shows the OHS is under utilised in the management of sickness absence. A significant change in the time taken to refer after training was not observed. However this was affected by a low number of absentees in the study group. Where referrals are made, there is an improvement in the quality of information provided which suggests better communication between the Occupational Health Service and managers who attend the course.