Employers’ views on the new Fit Note: a qualitative interview study
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ABSTRACT

Background: The Fit Note replaced the sick note on the 6 April 2010. The fit note should help more people stay in work and prevent long term sickness absence. It is expected to benefit the British economy by an estimated £240 million over the next ten years. The fit note enables doctors to advise people who are off sick for more than one week, whether they could return to work earlier with extra support from their employer.

Aims: To review the Government’s reasons for developing a new statement of fitness for work and to explore employers’ views on the fit note and their experience during the first year since its introduction and the overall level of occupational medicine and formal sickness certification training.

Method: A qualitative study was undertaken and face-to-face interviews were conducted with 21 participants (mainly HR officers and Line Managers) from a variety of industries.

Results: The study found that employers welcomed the introduction of the fit note and felt that it is an improvement on the sick note. The majority of employers felt that the fit note has the potential to promote an earlier return to work, if used properly. Participants reported that some GPs are using the fit note in the same way as the sick note and that many fit notes are completed incorrectly. Participants also reported that when workplace recommendations were suggested, it appeared to be largely patient lead, probably because the GP does not have enough knowledge of the workplace.

Conclusion: The study confirmed that the fit note has the potential to promote an earlier return to work. In order for the fit note to achieve its aim, further GP training is needed to raise awareness of the positive links between health and work and to ensure that GPs are equipped to provide support and advice to patients about fitness for work issues. Employers should also look at their own practices and support Line Managers to be able to accommodate workplace restrictions where possible.