**Surveillance of work-related mental ill health: do General Practitioners’ decisions on diagnostic categorisation differ from those of occupational physicians and psychiatrists and does training in occupational medicine influence opinions on the work-relatedness of a case?**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Work-related mental ill health is of increasing importance and there is a need for reliable data on this to protect workers’ health. The occupational surveillance scheme THOR receives reports in this area from three groups of doctors: occupational physicians, psychiatrists and general practitioners (GPs). A recent study using vignettes based on real cases indicated that occupational physicians and psychiatrists had similar diagnostic preferences, but psychiatrists were more likely to assess given cases as being work-related. It is not known how the diagnostic preferences of GPs compare with the other two groups, while factors influencing a doctor’s assessment of the work-relatedness of a case are not clearly understood. This study sought to investigate both of these areas.

**Objectives:** Firstly, to examine the diagnostic preferences in cases of mental ill health of GPs who report to THOR. Secondly, to examine if post-graduate training in occupational medicine could be an influencing factor in a doctor’s decision on whether an illness is work-related.

**Design:** A cross-sectional postal survey.

**Methods:** Two groups of 150 GPs were examined: one comprising GPs with training in occupational medicine, the other comprising GPs without such training. The 100 case vignettes used in the previous study were assessed by both groups, each GP assessing four vignettes and assigning each a diagnostic category and also indicating if they felt it was work-related.

**Results:** The response rate across the two GP groups was 50%. The pattern of diagnostic classifications of general practitioners was similar to that of occupational physicians and psychiatrists from the previous study. There was no significant difference
between the two GP groups as to the percentage of cases thought to be work-related. Compared with occupational physicians, GPs and psychiatrists assessed a significantly greater percentage of the cases to be work-related.

**Conclusion:** When assessing the same cases presented in the same way, GPs classify psychiatric diagnoses in a similar way to psychiatrists and occupational physicians and consequently it should be possible to compare the reports from all three groups to give a valid, comprehensive picture of occupational mental ill health across the U.K. Occupational physicians appear less likely to state a case is work-related than do GPs or psychiatrists. The question of how a clinician decides on the work-relatedness of a case may not be related to training in occupational medicine. Further study will be necessary to clarify this and to assess other factors that may influence this decision.