Phased return to work: the evidence base and a survey of occupational physicians’ current practice

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Phased return to work (PRtW) is an incremental increase in working hours back to usual hours, over a defined period, following longer-term sickness absence. Despite a high profile in policies and guidance, studies on its effectiveness are almost absent from the literature. There is limited justification provided for its use, and few concise definitions. This study aimed to provide a clearer understanding of PRtW by reviewing the evidence for its use and studying occupational health physicians’ (OHPs) current practice in advising on PRtW.

Methods: A search of the literature (and a range of other resources) was undertaken. An online questionnaire survey of members of the Society of Occupational Medicine was undertaken, enquiring about OHPs’ current practice in advising on PRtW, and attitudes and beliefs regarding its use.

Results: 207 respondents from a wide range of backgrounds all advised on PRtW and regarded it as a useful strategy. They preferred to offer specific advice, advising on work activities as well as hours. In deciding on PRtW advice, they regarded medical aspects and functional capacity as more important and organisational factors (e.g. policies and beliefs of the employer) as less important. They valued flexible approaches to PRtW, with a preference for reducing shift length. Higher qualification in occupational medicine was associated with advising on a wider range of PRtW duration (the longest PRtW advised was longer than those less qualified, and the shortest was shorter). Differences between public and private sector were identified, regarding how PRtW is accommodated and supported by employers.

Conclusions: Direct evaluation of PRtW as an intervention is difficult due to its frequent use in usual care but there is wider evidence supporting its use. OHPs regard themselves as central to advising on PRtW but future work is needed to better define the key components of PRtW policies and organisations’ approaches to accommodating PRtW. Advice on PRtW could be an important part of a revised Med 3 certificate.