Sickness certification matters
Dr Richard M Roope, 2007

ABSTRACT

Background: Doctors are inconsistent in sickness certification, which may be influenced by their gender, years since qualification, training, or knowledge of guidelines.

Aim: This study aims to assess general practitioners’ (GPs’) training, knowledge and application of the Department of Work and Pensions’ (DWP’s) sickness certification guidelines. Secondary aims include an investigation of sickness certification guidance provided by hospital-based doctors, and whether GPs wish to continue as “certifiers” of sickness absence.

Methods: A cross sectional study using a structured questionnaire was sent to GPs within a former Primary Care Trust (PCT). The questionnaire probed demographics, training, knowledge of sickness certification guidelines, guidance received from hospital-based colleagues on sickness absence duration, and views on who should issue sickness certificates. Case histories with structured questions were used to assess current practice.

Results: GPs had received, on average, 1.5 hours training in sickness certification. The DWP’s guidelines/website had never been accessed by 80.5% and 89.6% of responders respectively. The proportion of responders concurring with DWP’s guidelines for cases of an inguinal hernia repair, myocardial infarction or an uncomplicated abdominal hysterectomy were 55.8%, 54.1% and 23.4% respectively. In the case of uncontrolled sleep apnoea 7.9% GPs gave incorrect driving advice; while 7.9% GPs provided incorrect return to work advice to food handlers with diarrhoeal symptoms. Of note, 88.2% recalled rarely receiving guidance about sickness certification duration from hospital-based colleagues for discharged patients. A minority of GPs (41.4%) wish to retain the role of sickness “certifier”.

Conclusions: This evidence of variable practice indicates that GPs should have more guidance and education in sickness certification. Closer sickness certification monitoring through existing GP computer systems may facilitate an improvement in practice that benefits patients and employers. The DWP, medical educators and PCTs may all have an additional role in further improving sickness certification practice.