The prognostic accuracy of return to work timescales as advised by occupational physicians

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ABSTRACT

Subjects: NHS employees referred to occupational health departments during a period of ongoing sickness absence with the main inclusion criterion of being still absent from work at the time of the initial occupational health assessment.

Participants: The study involved multi-centre participation across several NHS occupational health departments. Each occupational health physician partaking in the study was requested to collect data from a target of 10 cases fitting the study inclusion criteria.

Results: Occupational physicians tend to underestimate the duration of sickness absence episodes by an average of two weeks (mean of -2.1 weeks with 95% confidence interval values (-3.2 to -1.1) and a p value of <0.001).

Conclusion: Occupational physicians have both a role and responsibility in ensuring that employees return to work at an appropriate stage in their recovery. The study findings suggest that occupational physicians underestimate the recovery times of their patients. The study provides potential learning points which can serve to inform physicians to re-evaluate their current practice on predicting return to work timescales and direct future study endeavours into the factors associated with return to work timescales.