Health advice for occupational travel

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ABSTRACT

Background: A significant amount of research has considered the sources of advice used by individuals travelling overseas. In contrast, little was known about the sources of advice used by companies sending employees overseas.

Aim of study: This study aimed to discover what travel health services companies need, where they get their advice, whether their needs are met and what use is made of the advice. The role of Occupational Health services (OH) in travel health was studied.

Methods: A self-administered questionnaire was posted to a random sample of 203 companies known to the North East Chamber of Commerce. Response was encouraged by repeat mailing, e-mail and telephone. Medical, nursing and health and safety literature was searched.

Results: Eighty four companies (41%) responded, of which 43 (51%) had sent employees overseas in the preceding year. Sixteen companies had an OH service available to them but only 4 used OH for travel health advice. A wide range of other sources were cited. ‘Company Advice Scores’ and comprehensiveness of service were higher in companies advised by OH than others. Other results suggested that OH-advised companies do the most extensive risk assessments and were more likely to understand their legal responsibilities but differences did not reach statistical significance due to small numbers.

Conclusion: OH services operate a different model of travel health advice than that used by other medical sources. Companies advised by OH were more likely to receive advice addressed to the company as distinct from the employee and received a more comprehensive service than companies advised by other sources. This study was not able to show if this translated into increased use of risk assessment of travel health hazards by companies. Suggestions for further research are given.