

# The Working in Partnership Programme

## Addressing workload management in general practice

### Sickness Certification Scheme

The *Working in Partnership Programme* (WIPP) has been established under the new GMS Contract to develop and implement a strategy for general practice that addresses the effective use of clinicians' time whilst improving the availability of services for patients.

The WIPP has commissioned a scheme to look at alternatives to the current system for sickness certification.

#### Workload issues

Current arrangements around provision of sick-notes do not always serve the best interests of employees, employers, occupational health professionals or certifying doctors.

Currently, GPs have to sign medical certificates for anyone who has been off work due to sickness for more than seven days and some employers ask for such confirmation for shorter periods. In addition, managing the absence of patients with longer-term, more substantial illnesses can create a significant workload for GPs and other members of the general practice team.

Each GP gets around 577 requests for sick-notes every year from employees who have been off sick for more than 7 days.

The most common causes for sick-note requests are for work-related ailments such as back pain, depression and workplace stress.

Four in ten GPs think over 30 per cent of their patients who are unable to work, could actually work some hours, or in a slightly different role, but that their employer doesn't facilitate their return to work.

Reference 1

#### Managing the issues

Alternative resourcing strategies could help to reduce the workload of doctors in general practice, as well as offer improvements for employees and employers.

#### The scheme

The *Sickness Certification Scheme* has been commissioned to test how feasible it will be to provide alternatives to the current arrangements. Pilot sites will explore different aspects of sickness management, through a range of services provided by specialists in occupational health, in three different settings:

- Based locally within a company
- In GP practices
- Working remotely from a specialist call centre

The *Sickness Certification Scheme* is being developed and progressed by Developing Patient Partnerships (DPP).

Other partners in the scheme include the Department of Health, the NHS, the Department for Workforce and Pensions (DWP) and the University of Warwick.

#### Pilot sites

Pilot sites for the scheme include five large, five medium and five small enterprises, a Primary Care Trust, a regional police force, the Health at Work Project in Liverpool and the Sheffield Occupational Health Project.

#### Evaluation

In addition to the impact on workload in general practice, the scheme will evaluate the impact the different models have on many other aspects of sickness management. These include sickness absence rates and clinician, employer and employee views about the new system.

The *Sickness Certification Scheme* will also examine the training needs of occupational health professionals to undertake the proposed new roles.

The University of Warwick is leading on the evaluation of this scheme.

#### Results

The scheme began in June 2004 and is expected to complete in April 2006. There will be an interim report in June 2005.

It is expected that evaluation of the report will inform future policy on sickness certification.

#### Further information

*Working in Partnership Programme:*

[www.natpact.nhs.uk/workloadmanagement](http://www.natpact.nhs.uk/workloadmanagement) or email the Programme Manager [clayre.latrobe@modern.nhs.uk](mailto:clayre.latrobe@modern.nhs.uk)

*Sickness Certification Scheme:* [www.dpp.org.uk](http://www.dpp.org.uk) or email the Project Manager [barbara.kneale@mpsa.com](mailto:barbara.kneale@mpsa.com)

#### References

1. Norwich Union: "Health of the Nation" survey (a panel survey of 255 GPs by Dr Foster on behalf Norwich Union) January 2004.

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The *Working in Partnership Programme* sits within the portfolio of support available to Primary Care Trusts and practices from the NHS Modernisation Agency's National Primary and Care Trust Development Team (NatPaCT).

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