

MEDICAL FITNESS FOR WORK: THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICIANS IN DISABILITY INSURANCE CLAIMS

INSURANCE AND SAVINGS OMBUDSMAN (‘ISO’) CONFERENCE

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AUCKLAND

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OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH



DEFINITION

The promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical and social well-being of workers in all occupations

IMPAIRMENT, DISABILITY AND HANDICAP

DEFINITIONS (WHO)

A disease or injury produces an impairment (of structure or function)

A **disability** is the resulting reduction or loss of an ability to perform an activity

A **handicap** is a social disadvantage resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a normal role

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REHABILITATION



A process aimed at enabling persons with disabilities to reach and maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychiatric and/or social functioning levels, thus providing them with the tools to change their lives towards a higher level of independence

(UNGA 48/96)

OCCUPATIONAL REHABILITATION



The re-introduction of people to their jobs following illness or injury (or some other unfitness for all or some aspects of their work) in such a way as to facilitate return to full duties (and earning capacity)

OCCUPATIONAL REHABILITATION



‘Occupational Rehabilitation is the combined and co-ordinated use of medical, psychological, social, educational and vocational measures to restore function, or to achieve the highest possible level of function of persons at work following illness or injury’

(ACOM/ACRM 1987)

OCCUPATIONAL REHABILITATION



Occupational Rehabilitation requires an assessment of the physical and mental capacities of the individual, and of the demands of the job, and the provision of counselling, training and selective work placement

OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE



DEFINITION

The clinical specialty concerned with the diagnosis, management and prevention of diseases due to, or exacerbated by, workplace factors

ROLE OF AN OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICIAN WITHIN AN ORGANISATION



- **To provide occupational health care to employees and other contracted staff as appropriate**
- To undertake assessments of medical fitness for work of employees
- To undertake assessments of medical fitness for work for prospective employees
- To undertake periodic health surveillance of the health of groups of employees

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ROLE OF AN OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICIAN WITHIN AN ORGANISATION



- **To assist with the development of policy for the organisation's Occupational Health Service**
- To assist with the development of corporate policy relating to workplace H&S issues
- To provide periodic education and advice to employees on workplace health and safety issues
- Periodically to attend learning programmes to maintain and develop clinical and academic skills

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ROLE OF AN OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICIAN WITHIN AN ORGANISATION



- **To provide advice on the assessment and management of workplace hazards**
- To assist with the co-ordination of occupational rehabilitation following injury or illness
- To work as part of a team of occupational health professionals towards meeting the organisation's corporate goals

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ETHICS IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE



Doctors traditionally have three main forms of contact with patients:

- 1. Therapeutic doctor-patient relationship**
2. Impartial/independent medical examiner reporting to a third party
3. Research worker

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ETHICS IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE



In addition, occupational physicians have a further important function ...

- 4. To provide expert advice to managers and to employees or their representatives, including on the health effects of workplace hazards and on the employee's medical fitness for work**

CONFIDENTIALITY IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

Clinical data or other information disclosed only under certain circumstances

(including when authorised by the person)

Advice given to management regarding the health of employees generally confined to advice on a person's capabilities (medical fitness for work) and limitations of function

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LEVEL OF SICKNESS ABSENCE

Geographical

Climate
Region
Ethnic Origin
Social Insurance
Health Services
Epidemics
Unemployment
Social Attitudes
Pension Age
Taxation

Organisational

Nature
Size
Industrial Relations
Personnel Policy
Sick Pay
Supervisory Quality
Working Conditions
Environmental Hazards
Occup Health Service
Labour Turnover

Personal

Age
Gender
Occupation
Job Satisfaction
Personality
Life Crises
Medical Conditions
Alcohol
Family Responsibility
Journey to Work
Social Activities
Length of Service

FACTORS IN JOB SATISFACTION

Organisational factors shown to be more important than individual factors in predicting well-being of employees in terms of feelings of professional fulfilment and perceived workload

Thomsen et al. *Feelings of professional fulfilment and exhaustion in mental health personnel: the importance of organisational and individual factors.* Psychother Psychosom May/Jun 1999;68(3):157-164.

ROLE OF AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE



To provide an occupational health and safety program which:

- **defines factors influencing health and well-being;**
- controls these factors in the occupational environment;
- educates and counsels workers;
- involves workers in discussion of health hazards;

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To provide an occupational health and safety program which:

- **monitors the occupational environment and the health of workers as required by circumstances;**
- co-ordinates safety, occupational hygiene and occupational health services; &
- supports teamwork between specialist advisers and line management.

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The most important roles of occupational health professionals include:

- **provision of advice on occupational, environmental and product hazard control;**
- investigation of causes of occupational impairment of health;
- health surveillance;
- health promotion;

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The most important roles of occupational health professionals include:

- **maintenance of health records;**
- treatment of work-related illness and injury;
- counselling;
- rehabilitation; and
- organisation of a first-aid service

Reference: International Labour Organisation's Recommendation No. 112 (1959)

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