

Introduction

The Occupational Health Adviser (OHA) provides a range of services to promote and protect health at work, assess and advise on fitness for work and ensure health issues are effectively managed. The role of the OHA is to focus on a working environment where physical and psychological wellbeing can be supported and sustained.

It is therefore important to provide complete and appropriate information when referring an employee to Occupational Health. Referrals which are incomplete, or contain inappropriate or irrelevant information, will be returned to the line manager and this may result in a delay in receiving the service you require.

The following guidance is to assist line managers when making an Occupational Health referral.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

All referrals and the information they contain are treated under the legislation governing medical confidentiality and data protection. Before submitting an OH Referral Form you must advise the employee that you are referring them to Occupational Health and explain the reason for the referral. In order to supply the best possible advice, it may be necessary to obtain further medical information from GPs or treating specialists. In such cases the OHA will ask the employee to consent to this request in line with the Access to Medical Records Act 1998. The line manager will be informed if a request for a GP/specialist report has been made.

The purpose of a referral

The purpose of a referral to the OH Adviser (OHA) is to provide advice and support to line managers where there is concern about an employee's health or where a health problem could be affecting an employee's ability to do their job. A referral to OH for advice and assistance in managing such concerns effectively, should be made by the line manager, following advice from their HR Business Partner.

OH Referral Form

Managers and/or HR Business Partners may refer an employee for an occupational health assessment and advice when there is concern about an employee's health and the effect of this at work. This may be done in accordance with and as part of the Managing Sickness Absence Procedure. For example where there is long term sickness absence, a newly diagnosed or progressive ill health problem or frequent short intermittent sickness absence. The OH Referral Form must contain full details of the employee, their job description, an outline of the health issues and the matters on which opinion is sought.

To get the best advice from OH, the referral will need to include enough detail for an appropriate assessment to be made.

The information should include:

- the reasons for the referral;
- the specific questions to be answered;
- the employee's previous attendance record;
- current job description;
- whether the department could support modified duties or reduced hours for a period of time if that would facilitate an earlier return to work

- any relevant risk assessments (e.g., DSE, stress, pregnancy).

This helps the OH Adviser understand the nature of the employee's work and advise whether any aspects might be affecting their health. Please note, anecdotal information, hearsay and speculation should be avoided when completing the OH Referral Form.

The OH Referral Form has been designed to assist the line manager in providing the information necessary to carry out a medical assessment and communicate the required information back to the line manager and, where appropriate, to the employee's GP and/or treating specialist. On receipt of the completed OH Referral Form, the earliest available appointment will be sent to the employee and copied to their line manager. If inconvenient, this will be changed to a suitable alternative date and time.

Benefits of an OH Referral

The assessment will provide advice on:-

- Fitness for work: whether or not the person has a health problem that may affect fitness for work;
- Return to work: if the person is currently absent, when they are likely to return;
- Rehabilitation advice: measures that may enable the person to return to work before full recovery (with approval of the GP or treating specialist);
- Future attendance: how much absence may be likely in future due to health problems;
- Future performance: is the person fit to undertake part or the full range of work duties;
- Investigation of work-related illness/injury - assessment of whether a health problem is likely to be work-related or not;
- Ill-health retirement assessment - to advise whether the criteria for ill health retirement may be met according to the university's policy. In ill health retirement cases it is usual for evidence to include an assessment of capability, matched to the requirements of the job, as well as medical evidence about illness or injury.

The advice should enable concerns to be addressed in a fair, sensitive and consistent manner, balancing the needs of the employee with the needs of the department/institute.

When to refer

An employee should be referred for an assessment where:-

- There is concern that an employee may have work related health problems or that their health is being aggravated by work tasks;
- There are difficulties coping on an employee's return from a period of absence;
- An employee has returned following a serious illness or due to a disability;
- There may be underlying ill health or disability contributing to performance issues;
- There is long term or frequent sickness absence.

Line Managers may seek advice from their HR Business Partner as to whether a referral is appropriate. In addition, the referral may be discussed with or initiated by the HR Business Partner.

When to refer again?

You will have been given details in the report if the OH Adviser wishes to see the employee again – you should find the detail somewhere near the end of the report.

There is no set rule however about re-referring your employee back to OH, so advice should be sought from the HR Business Partner, as each case is different and time-factors often play a role. A further OH Referral Form should be completed. This should include an update since the last referral was made, any additional further information that may assist the OH Adviser assess the employee's progress together with any further questions you would like to raise.

How to make a referral

The key to obtaining useful advice from OH is to make a detailed referral that provides the OH Adviser with the relevant information. The OH Referral Form has been designed to help you do this.

The reason for the referral must be discussed with the employee prior to the OH Referral Form being sent on to the HR Manager.

Making the appointment

Once a referral has been received by the HR Business Partner, the case will be triaged. Where it is considered that a referral is appropriate, an appointment will be made with the OH Adviser. The appointment details will then be sent directly to the employee and the line manager will also be informed of the date and time of the appointment in case the employee's work needs to be covered to enable them to attend the appointment.

The OH appointment

An initial assessment usually lasts about 30 minutes and aims to collect sufficient information to provide an accurate, objective and useful opinion regarding fitness to perform the job.

The employee will be asked about:-

- The health issue or disability and any concerns that they have as well as any treatment that they may be receiving;
- The work that they undertake and any difficulties arising from health or other reasons;
- Any activities out of work that they are involved with that may also be affected by the condition.

In some instances it may be necessary to request further information from the employee's general practitioner (GP) and / or hospital specialist. The employee may also be advised to attend specific classes or treatment to facilitate a return to work e.g., physiotherapy, back care classes, fitness classes or provided with lifestyle advice.

It may be necessary to review the employee to assess their progress as well as any medical reports received, before a firm opinion can be made about any return to work or return to full duties.

Employee Perceptions versus Management Perceptions

It is commonly observed by managers that occupational health doesn't challenge employee perceptions and accepts everything the employee says at face value. This is incorrect.

During the OH appointment an employee will be encouraged to express their perceptions where the employee believes their work has caused their illness. However, the manager will have already provided information, on the referral form, and this will enable the OH Adviser to obtain a broad view of the issues.

The OH Adviser will independently assess the situation, taking into account their experience in dealing with occupational issues and their specialist knowledge of the workplace. A detailed history will be taken, including details on relevant, and past, health issues, treatment, day-to-day restrictions, and

work issues. Where appropriate the OH Adviser may undertake an examination to determine functional capability. This can provide a more balanced view of the issues.

It is important to remember that sometimes there are two different views of the same situation. The OH Adviser has a role to play to ensure a manager is made aware of differing views so that these can be discussed with the employee as unresolved differences may serve as a barrier to a return to work.

Management Reports

The content of a management report will depend on the reason for the referral, the specific questions that have been asked and any necessary specific recommendations. Medical details are not usually disclosed unless this is deemed necessary when managing the employee in their work and when the employee has given their informed consent for disclosure.

The management report contains the professional opinion of the OHA based on the information in their possession.

Information provided may cover:-

- Whether the employee has an underlying health condition or disability that may affect attendance or performance at work;
- If so, the likely effects on future attendance/performance;
- Whether time off work will be required for appointments/treatments;
- When the employee may be likely to return to work;
- Recommendations on how to assist with an effective return to work;
- Advice regarding any workplace restrictions/adaptations;
- Whether the condition may be covered by the Equality Act 2010.

The management report will be sent to the HR Business Partner who will arrange for a copy to be sent to the line manager. There is no requirement for an employee to agree with the contents of the report or its recommendations before it is released to the line manager. The employee will have an opportunity to comment on the management report during their meeting with the line manager.

The line manager should arrange to meet the employee to discuss the way forward including discussing any recommendations and whether they can be accommodated. Any phased return to work should also be discussed and documented. Following the meeting a letter should be sent to the employee to confirm any actions arising and a copy of letter should also be sent to HR for uploading to PoblAberPeople. Where contractual changes arise as a result of any recommendations, HR will send a change of contract letter to the employee to confirm the arrangements made.