What are the consequences of sickness presenteeism and sickness absence on employee health and wellbeing?

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Overview

• What do we mean by sickness presenteeism (SP)
• Why do people go to work whilst ill
  – What they have found about SP
• What are the consequences of SP
• Can SP be beneficial?
• Voluntary SP versus involuntary
• Suggestions for further research
Sickness Presenteeism...

"the phenomenon of people, despite complaints and ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, still turning up at their jobs".

Aronsson and Gustafasson (2000:503)
Why people go to work ill

• Take a minute and think back to a time when you went to work ill when you should really have stayed at home.....

......why did you make that decision?
Why people go to work ill

• A response to work-related demands e.g
  (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005: Miraglia and Johns 2016)
  • Time pressures
  • Replaceability
  • High workload
  • Understaffing
  • Organizational policies around absenteeism

• A response to personal-related demands e.g
  • Difficulty in saying no (boundarylessness)
  • Financial demands
  • Work ethic (e.g. Collins and Cartwright, 2012)
Sickness Presenteeism

• Fairly common occurrence:
  – 47% - Swedish police study (Leineweber et al, 2011)
  – 73% - Danish workforce sample (Hansen & Andersen, 2008)
  – 66% - UK National Health Service staff survey reported SP (previous 3 months) (Admasachew & Dawson, 2011)

• Measured by a single question (e.g. Over the last 12 months how many days have you gone to work despite being ill or injured?)
Survey studies looking at SP have found higher levels of reported SP associated with:

- Higher levels of psychological distress (Biron et al., 2006)
- Reduced psychological well-being (e.g. Collins et al., 2017)
- Lower physical health and elevated exhaustion (Liu et al., 2014)
- Poor self-rated health (e.g. Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005)
Reviewed articles that were:

- Peer reviewed
- Longitudinal studies with at least one follow-up after baseline (initial measurement)
- Measured sickness presenteeism

12 studies identified
What are the outcomes associated with SP over time

• All studies reviewed found an association between SP at baseline and an increased risk of a negative future outcome
  • Future sickness absence
    – 2+ days increase risk of future long and short term
  • Decreased self-rated health
    – SP at baseline leads to future poor self-rated health at 12 months and 24 months follow up
Consensus is still to be reached for other outcomes

• Physical health – limited evidence
  • High SP and SA – higher risk for physical complaints
    (Gustafsson and Marklund, 2011, 2013)

• Mental health – mixed evidence e.g.
  • 8+ days SP associated with increased risk of depression
    (Conway et al., 2014)
  • 5+ days associated with lower mental wellbeing
    (Gustafsson and Marklund, 2011, 2013)

• Other studies did not find an association (e.g. Lu et al 2014, Collins et al., 2017)
Variation across studies

- The SP measure:
  - Does not include the circumstances around the decision (or the type of illness or injury)
  - Adopts a long recall period

- The SP research:
  - does not measure the same health outcomes or uses a measure in different ways

- Healthy population – around a quarter of participants may not report any SP or SA
Can SP be beneficial?

Rehabilitation back into work

• Well managed return to work policies can help people who are recovering from illness or injury back into work earlier
  – Workers more productive than if absent
  – Helps organizations retain skilled staff
  – Promotes staff loyalty
  – Increases self-confidence of staff
  – Helps employees financially

(Baker-McClearn et al, 2010; Collins and Carwright, 2012)
“Of course once I was back in to the swing of things even though I was still in a bit of pain I was chomping at the bit to come back for 12 hours but they wouldn’t let me. They kept me for a good few months doing two, and then move up to four, and then I moved to six and then eight and they just sort of guided me” [male, food manufacturer].
There are differences between

- **Voluntary sickness presenteeism** (wanting to work despite illness)

and

- **Involuntary sickness presenteeism** (personal and work-related factors demands for attendance)
Workers with chronic conditions

- Holland and Collins (2017) study of workers with rheumatoid arthritis (RA)
  - In-depth interviews and 6 month follow up
  - 11 males and females with RA employed at disease onset
    - 9 participants still employed at interview (4 full-time)
    - 2 had left employment since diagnosis
Study results

• Participants perceived the value of work

I wouldn’t want to sit at home all day because it is soul destroying and I find it really hard being at home, I miss the stimulation of work and the company of other people.

Jackie, age 46, pharmacy technician.
Study results

• Seeking normality after first onset
• Keeping productive, and employed, through workplace adjustments
  • Adjustments to physical environment
  • Flexible working
  • Modified duties
Theme 3

- Sickness absence policies causing pressure to work
  - Lead to involuntary sickness presenteeism

[They were] saying ‘oh right you’ve only got so much sick leave left’ and, it was very stressful...two weeks after I’d returned to work [I had] another absence review meeting and I was advised that my reviews had to go to the head of service for him to make a decision on whether I’d be dismissed...and I’d not even had my adjustments put in place and had not even finished my phased return...

Mandy, age 34, call-centre administrator
Study conclusion

• We found for individuals with long-term conditions who wish to remain in work, organizational practices such as workplace adjustments can facilitate voluntary SP and:
  • Promote work retention
  • Reduce sickness absence
Suggestions for further research

• What health conditions meet the ‘sick’ criteria
• What health conditions do participants experience with SP?
• Chronic conditions versus acute illnesses
• Organizational culture e.g policies around sickness absence
• Further exploration of the positive aspects of voluntary sickness presenteeism amongst:
  – The general working population
  – Workers with chronic health conditions
• The interplay between sickness absenteeism and SP (Gustafsson and Marklund, 2013; Delve et al., 2011)
Take-home messages

• There is a negative aspect to going to work while ill:
  – An increased risk of future sickness absence
  – A risk factor for decreased self-rated health
  – May may lead to poorer mental health in the future
• But SP can be good for employee health and wellbeing if:
  – voluntary (people want to work despite illness) and
  – supported by organizational policies and practices
Thank you for listening...

.......Thoughts and questions?
References


