Supporting employees with cancer

Experience shows us that cancer can be a devastating disease. It can have a far-reaching detrimental impact on an employee's capability to function in and out of work.

Absence from work may be due to the disease causing functional limitations, or as a consequence of treatment regimes which may be time consuming and cause unpleasant and significant side effects. However, cancer treatment has evolved immensely during the last few decades and its efficacy has improved, in addition to a reduction in unwanted side effects caused by treatment.

Sometimes, it must be remembered, that co-morbid conditions such as anxiety and depression can have an understandable impact. The way an employer reacts to an employee with cancer will have a big impact on their morale. All employees should be treated equitably and adherence to company policies implemented.

In our experience, returning to work at the earliest appropriate medical opportunity, can often represent an important 'normality' for an individual experiencing cancer, and can be therapeutic for the employee.

There are more than 200 different types of cell in the body and subsequently **over 200 different forms of cancer,** each classified in accordance with type and site of cell origin.[1]

In 2015, there were an estimated 890,000 people of working age living with cancer in the UK. This is set to **increase** to **1,150,000 by 2030.**[2]

1 in 2 UK people will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.[3]

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Employees thinking of returning to work?

A cycle of prescribed rest by a medical practitioner may well be required, but this may also exacerbate 'deconditioning' and further reduce stamina. Employees should seek lifestyle and pacing advice from treating clinicians. Medically supervised exercise programmes can improve functionality, and, in addition, psychological assistance is often helpful.

Planning and managing a return to work

- Macmillan Cancer Support advocates that employers should not refrain from broaching the subject of returning to work in appropriate cases.
- In our experience cancer-related fatigue or other physical symptoms related to treatment may be common, and can reduce the anticipated pace of a return to work. Implementation of graduated programmes, for example, can improve stamina at an achievable and practicable rate.
- When planning a return to work, regular contact with the employee should be maintained, and employers should conduct return-to-work interviews.

Sources

(1) www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/understanding-cancer

(2) https://www.macmillan.org.uk/_images/people-of-working-age-with-cancer_tcm9-282791.pdf

(3) https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/risk/lifetimerisk

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