

# Call for change to 'fit note' legislation

**M**ANY of us worry about the impact that being unable to work for an extended period of time might have on our financial health.

Fewer of us realise the toll that being out of work actually has on our physical and mental health.

Research shows being out of work is as bad for our health as smoking 10 packets of cigarettes a day.

Being active, a member of a community and undertaking good work is critical to our overall health and wellbeing.

That is why many services around Wales focus specifically on helping people stay in work if they are unwell or return to work as soon as they are able to after an illness or accident.

Sick notes, which focus on what people are unable to do, have been replaced with "fit notes".

The new system identifies what someone can or could do if the right support or adjustments were put in place.

This is an important shift in how we support people in Wales to live well and reinforces that good work is good for you, leading to improved health and wellbeing.

General Practitioners (GPs) deal with work-related issues on a daily basis. Currently, they are the only profession that can sign a "fit note".

They often have to work with their patients to make decisions about whether they are fit for work (either to stay in work or return to work).

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy have highlighted that these two professions could provide valuable support to ease pressure on busy GPs if they were also able to sign "fit notes".

The two professions bring important knowledge and skills around enabling people to manage their own conditions, in work as well as in other areas of daily life, which means their advice and assistance is practical and focused on everyday barriers to participating in work.

When we're off work for an extended period of time we need a 'fit note' from our GP to tell our employer what we're physically able to do. Ruth Crowder, from the Royal College of Occupational Therapists, and Pip Ford, from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, believe more professions should be able to sign these notes to ease doctors' workloads

The Royal College of GPs (RCGP) in Wales fully supports physiotherapists and occupational therapists signing "fit notes".

Dr Rebecca Payne, chairman of the RCGP in Wales, said: "General practice plays a vitally important role in supporting patients to return to work when they are able, which is beneficial to a patient's health and wellbeing.

"But all too often the workload and pressures facing GPs prevent the in-depth discussions that can really make a difference to a patient's recovery time.

"Bringing in health professionals who are qualified and able to advise on capability to work will help facilitate those more detailed discussions and ensure patients can access appropriate support when they need it."

When GPs struggle to find enough time to work with people to get them back to work, physiotherapists' and occupational therapists' skills and training make them perfectly placed to help people get back to work as soon as possible.

Both professions are already using the Allied Health Professions Advisory Fitness for Work Report, which provides a detailed assessment and recommendations which are a useful resource for GPs signing "fit notes" with their patients and their employers.

Dr Charlotte Jones, chairman of the BMA's Welsh General Practitioner's Committee, agrees with the

RCGP Wales, saying: "At a time where general practice faces unprecedented capacity challenges, we support calls for a change in legislation to allow other healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists and occupational therapists, to complete fit notes for patients."

Both the Royal College of Occupational Therapists and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in Wales are hopeful that there will be a change in the legislation and welcome the stance taken by organisations like the RCGP and BMA in Wales.

Dr Payne said: "RCGP Wales is calling for a change in legislation which will enable other healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists and occupational therapists to complete fit notes for patients returning to work.

"This will benefit patients and ensure they can access the support they need quickly so that they can return to the world of work as soon as they are ready to do so."

Dr Jones added: "This change would enable patients to access the support of the professional most able to help them to return to work. This change would avoid inconvenience to patients caused by having to take up a GP appointment after seeing a suitably qualified healthcare professional who is perfectly capable of advising on work capability."

This change would be better for people, better for employers and better for the health and care system.

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