

Measuring the impact of osteopathic practice on workplace sickness absence

Understanding the problem

In 2017/18, musculoskeletal conditions resulted in the loss of 6.6 million working days in the UK alone, with sufferers taking an average of 14 days off work per episode¹. This accounted for 24.6% of all sickness absence in the UK with a total estimated cost to the economy of 12.3 billion a year.

Every year, musculoskeletal conditions will affect one in four adults in the UK which constitutes 30% of all GP appointments. Musculoskeletal conditions accounted for over 25% of all surgical interventions in the NHS, and this is set to rise significantly over the next ten years².

Aims and objectives

To determine whether integrating osteopathic care into an occupational health setting has a positive impact on workplace sickness absence.

Service description

Swansea University is recognised as a centre for excellence in teaching and was recently awarded runner-up status in the prestigious Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2019. It employs 4500 staff and has had an established Masters Degree in Osteopathy since 2010.

In 2011 a pilot study was set up to investigate the impact of integrating osteopathic healthcare into the workplace in order to reduce sickness and absence amongst university staff. During the study period, a clinic was established within the university where staff were offered up to six treatments following referral from the occupational health department.

Method and approach

The initial study took place over a four month period and sick absence was compared to the same period in the previous year. Staff initially presented to the Occupational Health Department who, where appropriate, referred directly to the osteopathy clinic. Consent was sought at referral to allow sharing of information between the osteopathy clinic and Occupational Health.

Anonymised consolidated figures were reported to Occupational Health and Human Resources on a monthly basis.

Results and evaluation

Analysis of the data following the pilot period indicated that there had been a reduction of 139 sickness absence days. This represented an overall reduction of 25% during the four month pilot period. However, sickness absence across other areas within the University actually rose by 15% so the true

¹ <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/dayslost.htm>

² <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/clinical-policy/ltc/our-work-on-long-term-conditions/musculoskeletal/>

reduction may have been higher against this trend. Depending on how the cost of 1 days absence was calculated, this represented a mid-point saving of £23,630.

Over the same period, there were no formal requests for workstation assessments. This generated further savings of £8,000 pounds compared to the same period in the previous year. As such, the total saving during the period of the study was £31,630. The saving generated by the reduction in workstation assessments was more than enough to fund the cost of all clinical episodes undertaken during the period of the study. If the savings generated from the reduction in sickness absence were projected across a full year then the forecast for potential savings would have been £126,520.

There have been a number of studies undertaken where osteopathic services have been effectively used to achieve this result. For example, British Polythene Industries worked with a team of osteopaths to help provide employees with direct access to medical support. This initiative resulted in a 75% reduction in the number of working days lost due to musculoskeletal disorders. The initiative cost British Polythene £16,000 to initiate but returned a saving of £192,000 therefore providing a return on investment of £12 for every £1 spent. The conclusions were similar to the Swansea University pilot study.

Key learning points

- Osteopathic practice effectively reduced the number of work days lost to sickness by 25%.
- The findings of the study strongly indicate that this was a cost effective approach in the management of sickness absence. These findings were supported by similar studies which showed a return on investment of £12 for every £1 spent.
- The data support the use of osteopaths in an occupational health setting.

Plan for spread

The findings were presented to a number of large employers in the Swansea area who decided to adopt the approach defined in the pilot study. To date they continue to integrate the provision of osteopathic treatment into their strategies for managing sick absence within the workplace.

Key contacts

The original study was undertaken by Stephen Hartshorn who is contactable via The Institute of Osteopathy (enquiries@iosteopathy.org / 01582 488 455)