

Electricity Industry Occupational Health Advisory Group



Guidance Note 1.1

Occupational Health in the Electricity Industry

The Occupational Health Advisory Group for the Electricity Industry (OHAG) is an independent body of senior occupational physicians. They all have a professional role to provide advice to individual companies in the electricity industry and they meet together three times a year to discuss matters of common interest and to promote good practice in occupational health across the industry. The main route for doing this is by the preparation of guidance notes on topics of interest to the industry. The remit of OHAG and its guidance covers all aspect of the industry from generation, through transmission and distribution to retail and supply.

Until now the promulgation of this OHAG guidance has largely been by means of paper copies of the documents circulating within individual companies in the electricity industry. OHAG recognises that there is a need to make these papers more widely available and is grateful for the support provided by the Energy Networks Association (ENA) in hosting these documents on their website, and the links to them from the websites of the Association of Electricity Producers (AEP) and the Energy Retail Association (ERA).

The guidance notes will be of interest to managers, employees and occupational health professionals within the industry. They give general advice which has to be interpreted in the light of local circumstances. Health professionals using the guidance, retain an individual responsibility to act in accordance with appropriate professional standards and ethics. This guidance is offered in good faith and neither the individual members of OHAG, the companies they support, the ENA, AEP or the ERA can accept any liability for actions taken as a result of using the guidance.



Occupational Health in the Electricity Industry

1. Introduction

Occupational Health (OH) is a division of healthcare concerned with all aspects of health at work. More specifically it focuses on the effects of work on health and health upon work capacity.

The purpose of an Occupational Health Service is to ensure that management and staff have access to appropriate advice on all health issues relating to the business, to enable them to discharge their responsibilities under all legislation which is relevant to the health of employees and to advise on the prevention of occupational ill health. Modern OH should be business focussed and a key business partner. Through close working with other partners it can help deliver real and measurable benefits to the organisation.

Every company in the electricity industry should have access to specialised advice on occupational health from a doctor who is a specialist in occupational medicine, usually supported by one or more suitably qualified occupational health nurses. Such personnel do not, necessarily, need to be full time employees of the company.

2. Aims of this Document

The aims of this document are:

- To provide an understanding of modern OH
- To appreciate how OH can assist the electricity industry
- To understand how an OH service might operate

3. Relevant Legislation

- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995

4. Relevant Guidance

- Guidance on Ethics for Occupational Physicians, 6th Edition, 2006, Faculty of Occupational Medicine



5. Occupational Health

a. Function

The OH service has several key functions which might include:

- Health Surveillance - the prevention of occupationally related diseases and injuries through the implementation of effective health risk management programmes and health surveillance activities.
- Fitness for Work Assessment - assessing and advising employee's fitness for work, including compliance with statutory medical assessments where relevant.
- Sickness Absence Management – assisting management as part of the company sickness absence management policy. This might include the delivery of specific interventions aimed at assisting employees return to health and work.
- Health Promotion – advising and delivering initiatives to promote good health and well being in the workforce.
- Health Strategy and Policy – advising the organisation on issues relevant to the work environment and employee health. This might include providing advice for specific chemical, biological or physical workplace hazards.
- First Aid – assisting with the training of first aiders.
- Other Functions – including assisting in accident investigation, research etc.

b. Structure

OH staff might include physicians, nurses, technicians and administrative staff, as well as allied health professionals including physiotherapists and psychotherapists.

Physicians should be able to demonstrate experience and competency in OH and should preferably have a postgraduate qualification in occupational medicine. Fellowship (FFOM) and Membership (MFOM) of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine are specialist qualifications. Non-specialist qualifications include Associateship of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (AFOM) and the Diploma in Occupational Medicine (Dip OccMed). The occupational physician does not need to be an employee of the company.

Nurses would normally be a State Registered General Nurse and holder of an Occupational Health Nursing Certificate, Diploma or degree (OHND/C). Nurses who possess such postgraduate qualification are often referred to as Occupational Health Advisers or OHAs.



c. Operation

The OH service should be accessible to any employee who has, or thinks they might have, a work related health problem. This could be a question of work causing ill health or personal health having an impact on the ability to work. It is not a core function of the OH service to provide treatment for common medical problems; this task should remain with primary and secondary care services including the employee's general practitioner.

Managers will utilise the Occupational Health Service to help them with specific cases where they consider the health of an employee is an issue. Examples may be cases of sickness absence, deteriorating performance or suspected drug or alcohol abuse.

OH professionals must operate to strict professional and ethical standards. The principal of medical confidentiality exists and clinical (medical) information can only be provided to employers and managers with the informed consent of the individual. It should normally be possible to describe and advise on fitness for work in terms of an individual's functional capacity, rather than disclosing such clinical information.

Individual employees have a right of access to their occupational medical record through the Data Protection Act 1998. The record may contain clinical as well as management information.

It is not the role of OH to "police" sickness absence. OH will however assist in sickness absence management through the provision of advice, specific treatment interventions such as physiotherapy or psychotherapy, and strategies including vocational rehabilitation.

The Occupational Health Service should work closely with management to prevent occupational ill health by identifying health hazards, assessing health risks, advising on appropriate control measures and monitoring, reviewing and auditing their effectiveness. Health surveillance which encompasses processes designed to detect and prevent occupational ill health may be necessary as part of this. The Occupational Health Service should be the focus for any health related research initiatives.

The extent to which an Occupational Health Service is involved with health promotion initiatives, (such as voluntary health screening) and environmental issues (such as perceived risks from electric and magnetic fields or air pollution) will depend upon the organisation and activities of individual companies.



6. Recommendations

- All areas of the electricity industry should have access to competent occupational health advice.
- Occupational Health Services in the electricity industry should work with their business partners in order to develop and implement proactive workplace health strategies and initiatives.
- Occupational Health Services should work to evidence based principles and practices.
- OH should include promotion of employee health and prevention of workplace illness, with a focus on early intervention and rehabilitation using a broad range of medical services.

7. Summary

Occupational Health aims to promote and maintain health at work as well assisting individuals in the workplace with existing health problems. As a specialist branch of healthcare it has developed over recent years from historically a reactive treatment based service to a proactive risk based service that works in partnership with other business partners including HR and Safety.

Access to competent and timely occupational health advice is an essential business requirement for the electricity industry.

8. References & Sources of Further Information

1. Guidance on Ethics for Occupational Physicians, 6th Edition, 2006, Faculty of Occupational Medicine
2. Lewis J, Thornbury G (2006) Employment Law and Occupational Health. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford
3. Cox R (2007) Fitness for Work: the Medical Aspects. 4th Edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford