

Health and work update for clients as at 5th September 2023

PROMOTING, PROTECTING AND SUPPORTING HEALTH IN WORK

1. Government consultations on work and health

Within last month's brief I drew your attention to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) public consultation on their proposals aimed at increasing employers' use of occupational health services¹. I would again encourage our clients to take part in this consultation, as having the insights from a range of employers across diverse sectors is a key element in getting the right advice to Government.

I also highlighted last time that there is another Government consultation, by HM Treasury and HMRC, aimed at employers to explore the role of tax incentives to boost occupational health provision by employers². The majority of our clients have an employee assistance programme (EAP), but initiatives for example for physiotherapy to promote recovery from musculoskeletal injury can be seen by HMRC as a Benefit in Kind³, with tax implications. We would encourage provision of physiotherapy, as we do know that timely rehabilitation makes a significant difference to shorten recovery times⁴, and therefore an early and safe return to effectiveness in work. This consultation includes discussion on tax incentives to encourage wider use of occupational health, particularly small and medium-size enterprises, and expanding Benefit in Kind exemptions for medical benefits for employees.

The DWP consultation on the proposals aimed at increasing employers' use of occupational health services is at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/occupational-health-working-better>. The consultation on the role of tax incentives in boosting occupational health provision by employers is at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/joint-hmt-hmrc-consultation-on-tax-incentives-for-occupational-health>. Both consultations end on 12 Oct 2023.

2. Influenza vaccination

We are currently offering influenza vaccine to those clients who have made arrangements with us for this. Last year free NHS influenza vaccine was extended to those aged 50 to 64, as had been the case the previous winter, but this year policy reverts to the usual arrangement, which is that this is free to those over 65, pregnant women, and those with health conditions set out in Government guidance⁵.

As set out in the Government's plan for 'flu' immunisation 2023/24, frontline health care workers, including both clinical and non-clinical staff who have contact with patients, should be offered a 'flu'

¹ Government consultation on widening access to occupational health services at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/occupational-health-working-better>

² Government consultation aimed at employers to explore the role of tax incentives to boost occupational health provision by employers at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/joint-hmt-hmrc-consultation-on-tax-incentives-for-occupational-health>

³ Government guidance for employers on expenses and benefits at: [Expenses and benefits for employers: Overview - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁴ Chartered Society of Physiotherapy information on rehabilitation at: [Rehabilitation | The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy \(csp.org.uk\)](#)

⁵ National flu immunisation programme plan 2023 to 2024 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-flu-immunisation-programme-plan>

vaccine as part of the organisations' policy for the prevention of the transmission of 'flu' to help protect both staff and those that they care for. Social care workers directly working with people clinically vulnerable to 'flu' should also have the 'flu' vaccine provided by their employer.

3. COVID-19

The media has reported increased incidence of cases of COVID-19⁶, and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) updates note the circulation of a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 (BA.2.86) first identified in the UK on 18th August. There was one confirmed case noted in the update at that time⁷. Internationally rates of COVID-19 are much lower than the spike seen in December last year⁸, and cases in the UK remain low as reported to WHO⁹. UKHSA advise that there is currently insufficient data to assess the relative severity or degree of immune effectiveness compared to other currently circulating variants.

As this variant has a high number of mutations and is genomically distant from its likely ancestor, BA.2 (the second Omicron sub-variant) we could see transmission in the community this Autumn, much as we would see with other respiratory viruses. Infection for most people is likely to be milder than the original Wuhan virus, and so the impact for employers is likely to be increased short term sickness absence. This year COVID immunisation is being offered on the NHS similarly to Influenza immunisation, i.e., to those aged 65 and over, and those younger than 65 who their treating doctors consider to be more vulnerable through having conditions listed in Government guidance, as well as their carers¹⁰.

Front line health and social care workers will also be vaccinated under NHS arrangements, as for previous Government policy since the COVID-19 vaccines became available at the end of 2020.

We have had some interest from our clients about COVID vaccines and when they'll become commercially available. Our reading of Government statements is that this is likely to be the 2024/2025 season¹¹. We may be able to provide a combined 'flu'/COVID vaccination offering next year if COVID vaccine is available commercially then.

Dr Robin Cordell
MBA FRCP FFOM
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⁶ Guardian information on COVID-19 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/coronavirus-outbreak>

⁷ COVID-19 variants identified in the UK - latest UKHSA updates at: [COVID-19 variants identified in the UK - latest updates - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-variants-identified-in-the-uk-latest-updates)

⁸ WHO International COVID-19 dashboard at: <https://covid19.who.int/>

⁹ WHO COVID-19 dashboard for the UK at: <https://covid19.who.int/region/euro/country/gb>

¹⁰ JCVI statement on the COVID-19 vaccination programme for autumn 2023 as at 7 Jul 2023 - Government update as at 30 Aug 2023 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-autumn-2023-vaccination-programme-jcvi-update-7-july-2023/jcvi-statement-on-the-covid-19-vaccination-programme-for-autumn-2023-update-7-july-2023>

¹¹ The Guardian 18 Aug 2023 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/17/covid-booster-jabs-approved-for-sale-to-uk-public>