LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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A future forum for occupational health: role of vocational rehabilitation

Dear Sir,

The Vocational Rehabilitation Association greatly welcomes the recent editorial by Professor Harrison [1]. As a multiprofessional body, we welcome the recognition that many professions are able to contribute to improved functional outcomes (including in work) for those disadvantaged through ill-health, physical or mental impairments [2].

We believe that those practising vocational rehabilitation are already contributing to the national well-being by the following:

(i) Assisting those disadvantaged through mental or physical impairments (including states such as dyslexia) to prepare for the world of work
(ii) Better use of job retention strategies (already used by the best occupational health departments) thus reducing unnecessary sickness absence
(iii) Assisting those out of work through ill-health or impairments (of any nature) to regain employment [3].

The recognition of the contribution of rehabilitation professionals to occupational health has already been recognized through their incorporation into the Council for Work and Health [4], which was formed as a result of Dame Carol Black’s review [5]. Whether this will ‘develop a coherent and compelling vision and implementation plan to secure the health and well-being of the working population’ remains to be seen, but it is certainly moving in this direction.

Harrison is correct in noting the challenge of non-communicable conditions and their management in the workplace. We recognize that many clinicians need to develop knowledge of their patient’s working lives and the inter-relationships between health and work. Rehabilitation professionals can assist occupational health departments in this area, recognizing that occupational physicians may need to incorporate the assessment and management of disabling conditions into their training [6].

Anecdotes from our members suggest that some occupational health departments impede the return-to-work plans being suggested by VR professionals. This clearly needs investigation, but there is a view that some occupational health departments could improve their job-retention roles through use of developing case management techniques—further information from the Case Management Association of the UK [7].

Businesses are already offering both occupational health and vocational rehabilitation services. It is important that health support for those of working age in the UK incorporates best practice from both occupational health and rehabilitation.

Andrew Frank
Vocational Rehabilitation Association, Armstrong House, First Avenue, Robin Hood Road, Doncaster DN9 3GA, UK.
e-mail: andrew.frank1@btinternet.com

References