



Why we can't help working when ill

**The perverse causes of
presenteeism in the UK, with
a focus on prison officers
and academics.**

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The term ‘presenteeism’ refers to situations where employees continue to attend work while they are sick. In this report we look at why absenteeism policies can encourage presenteeism and how presenteeism presents in two working populations: UK prison officers and UK academics.

Presenteeism: useful stats, conclusions and ideas

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Although organisations tend to view presenteeism more positively than absenteeism, research findings are challenging the notion that an 'ideal worker' shows their commitment by working through sickness

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A recent survey of 600 UK businesses conducted by the CIPD (2015) indicated that more than one employer in three reported an increased incidence of presenteeism during the previous 12 months

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It has been estimated that presenteeism costs the UK economy almost twice as much as absenteeism

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Employees and organisations can benefit from continuing to work if their illness isn't overly debilitating or contagious

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Nonetheless, staff who continue to work when they are genuinely unwell may prolong their recovery and increase the risk of future sickness absence

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The risks to health can be serious - longitudinal research has found that the incidence of major coronary events doubled for unhealthy employees who did not take sick leave

Tackling absenteeism could increase presenteeism: what can be done?

Written by Andrew Clements, Gail Kinman and Jacqui Hart (see penultimate page for biographies)

Summary

Organisations need to focus on reducing the punitive parts of absenteeism policies if they want positive action on presenteeism. To discourage presenteeism, absenteeism must be destigmatised and shown to be acceptable.

Approaches to dealing with absenteeism and presenteeism include absence management systems to identify patterns of sickness, techniques to boost motivation and ways to raise awareness of sickness policies.

Although these approaches are common, we are concerned such methods may have unintended effects and be damaging rather than beneficial for organisations.

This is because absenteeism and presenteeism are complex and multi-determined behaviours and there are no simple strategies for managing them. If organisations are to reduce absenteeism but not increase presenteeism, they must take

consideration of the context and other relevant factors.

Presenteeism is rising, despite a fall in absenteeism

The CIPD Absence Management survey of 2016 shows that absenteeism is declining, whereas presenteeism appears to be rising.



Research by Natasha Caverley and colleagues found evidence that this is not because people are becoming healthier or less likely to pull a ‘sickie’ but that they are exchanging absenteeism for presenteeism.

To put it differently, if people are unwell, they have the choice of staying home – absenteeism – or going to work – presenteeism. This is a simplification, of course, and Gary Johns has argued that the factors that encourage absenteeism and presenteeism may differ.

While sickness is the main predictor of presenteeism, there are reasons for absenteeism besides sickness (such as job dissatisfaction or a lack of commitment).

Nevertheless, as we will discuss shortly, some initiatives for reducing absenteeism will probably result in people attending work while sick when they should be absent.

The paradox of presenteeism

A body of research shows that presenteeism has greater economic costs than absenteeism.

Yet, employee absenteeism is a much more visible problem – at an office, for example, one can see the empty desk which is usually occupied and can perhaps quantify work that remains undone.

For this reason, it is easy to see why there is a focus on reducing absenteeism; indeed few organisations recognise the risks of presenteeism, such as increased human error, let alone have procedures in place to manage it.

When sickness policies affect the most vulnerable

There are many factors that encourage people to work while sick. Some occupational groups are more likely to work while sick than others.

The availability of sick pay also directly influences presenteeism. Making it costly to take sick leave has the intended effect: people reduce the sick leave they take. Clearly, this will have the strongest impact on people who are paid the least.

Presenteeism is also more frequent in those who have less secure work, as they are disadvantaged in the labour market. Robust sickness monitoring also appears to increase rather than decrease presenteeism in workers.

Worryingly, people with chronic health problems are particularly likely to work while sick due to monitoring systems that are triggered by the frequency of absence.

We therefore consider it good news that the CIPD Absence Management survey reports that organisations are reducing their reliance on such techniques.

Are we encouraging unhealthy attitudes about sickness?

Sickness monitoring processes may well send implied yet unintended messages to the workforce: our own research found that employees commonly feel that their illness is not considered genuine by their employers and are concerned that they may be seen as malingerers.

Gwenllian Wynne-Jones and colleagues found that such beliefs were more common in organisations that used more intrusive approaches to monitor sickness. We have even heard of employees receiving phone calls from managers while awaiting surgery, not to wish them all the best but to ask when they will be returning to work.

Unhealthy attitudes about sickness are not solely confined to management, however, and workers do not necessarily see all illness as equal, with some complaints being considered more deserving of sick leave than others.

Greater motivation and support could encourage presenteeism

In order to reduce sickness absence, some recommend improving morale and encouraging staff to support each other. While this advice is broadly positive, it may actually compound the risk of presenteeism. When it comes to the impact of colleague support, the results are complex.

A meta-analytic review by Mariella Miraglia and Gary Johns showed that support may directly reduce presenteeism, but

indirectly increase it as people are more likely to work while sick if they are more satisfied.

Essentially, we are more likely to work during sickness when we enjoy our jobs but this is likely to have negative effects over the longer-term.

Loyalty to our colleagues is also likely to encourage presenteeism – particularly when the organisational resources are challenged by low staffing levels and/or high sickness rates at work already.

This is especially the case in health and social care, where the meaningfulness of the job and feelings of responsibility towards service users, as well as loyalty towards colleagues, can increase the risk of working while sick. While there are many good reasons to promote supportive relationships, motivation and happiness at work, they will not necessarily reduce presenteeism.

What should organisations do?

As can be seen, presenteeism is a challenging issue. In managing sickness, some actions that would be intuitively effective, such as the use of monitoring systems, may actually drive unhealthy behaviour in the form of presenteeism.

This risks backfiring, as people who work while sick tend to experience poorer health over the longer-term, are at greater risk of subsequent absenteeism and are less effective in their role.



Some of the drivers of presenteeism are things that we should not seek to reduce, such as motivation and loyalty; indeed, working while sick can be beneficial for those who are merely feeling a bit ‘under the weather.’

Focusing on one feature that organisations can control, we suggest the counterintuitive step of reviewing sickness monitoring processes and reducing their punitive outcomes. To discourage presenteeism, absenteeism must be de-stigmatised and shown to be acceptable.

The causes of presenteeism in UK prison officers

Written by Gail Kinman, Andrew Clements and Jacqui Hart (see penultimate page for biographies)

Summary

A strong sense of duty encourages presenteeism among prison officers, as well as the demands of the system. Increasing staffing levels and developing a healthy and sustainable sickness culture should be prioritised.

As well as threatening one's own health, presenteeism also has the potential to harm the wellbeing of others.

It is thought to be a particular problem in safety-critical work, as the slips, lapses of attention and errors that are likely to occur when people are feeling under par can have serious consequences. As yet, however, presenteeism in safety-critical occupations is an under-researched area.

Our study examined the prevalence, causes and consequences of presenteeism in the prison service – work that is undeniably safety-critical.

Prison officers work under challenging conditions in a highly pressurised environment: they are responsible for the wellbeing and safety of inmates in prisons that are increasingly overcrowded and understaffed, the incidence of threats, assault and trauma is high and staff are at high risk of physical and mental health problems.

Our survey was completed by 1,682 officers working in UK prisons. Eighty-four percent of respondents reported feeling under pressure to work while sick at least 'sometimes' and more than half (53 percent) indicated that they 'always' did so.

Several reasons were provided for why prison officers worked while sick

'Punitive' absence management systems and pressure from managers

Some officers described a strong 'anti-sickness' culture in their organisation and a lack of compassion for those who are unwell. Reports of prison governors phoning up staff on their first day of sick leave asking when they would be back at work were common.

The nature of the job and jobs market combined with the safety-critical industry

Fears about dismissal for 'medical inefficiency' tended to encourage presenteeism in a working environment that required 'reliable and uninterrupted service.'

These concerns were compounded by anxiety that options for re-employment would be limited if they left the service. Several older officers revealed that they worked while sick as an 'insurance policy' – to maintain an exemplary sickness record in case they ever needed to take time off for serious illness.

Presenteeism was also linked to staffing levels.

A strong sense of loyalty to co-workers and concerns for their wellbeing meant that taking time off sick would compromise their safety if there were 'not enough boots on the landing.'

Some officers continued to work when unwell as they were concerned that their illness would not be considered genuine and they would be seen by others as 'lame and lazy.'

This sense of guilt and shame was reinforced by some prisons making the names of people on sick leave publicly available.

Duty and concern for prisoner

A strong sense of duty and concerns about the wellbeing and rehabilitation of prisoners tended to encourage presenteeism.

Short staffing could mean that inmates were locked up all day with no opportunities for purposeful activity, or association with other prisoners. Working while sick was also seen as a sign of professionalism where some officers clearly took pride in 'not letting the side down.'

What were the negative impacts of presenteeism?

The negative impact of presenteeism on wellbeing and job performance was highlighted.

Officers who worked while sick were in poorer mental and physical health; they were also more likely to be emotionally exhausted, feel detached from the job role and have cynical attitudes towards prisoners.

Prison officers need to be physically and mentally fit in order to fulfil their duties safely and effectively. Pressurising staff to work through sickness has serious implications, not only for the wellbeing of officers but also for the safe running of prisons.

It is crucial to raise awareness that the long-term risks of presenteeism will outweigh any immediate gains. As yet,

few organisations take steps to discourage employees from coming into work while sick.

The prison service aims to achieve a sustained reduction in sickness absence among officers, but reducing absenteeism without further increasing the risk of presenteeism under current conditions will be challenging.

The findings of this study indicate that increasing staffing levels and developing a healthy and sustainable sickness culture should be prioritised.



Looking at presenteeism in UK academics

Written by Gail Kinman and Siobhan Wray (see penultimate page for biographies)

Summary

Academics who work during periods of sickness tend to be more emotionally exhausted and have a poorer work/life balance. Those with more job control are less likely to work during periods of sickness – even when they are experiencing high demand.

Academics in the UK and other countries have experienced a steady increase in work intensity over the last decade or so.

As well as growing demands and longer working hours, our research has found that levels of support from managers and control over key aspects of work have reduced markedly.

Achieving a healthy balance between work and personal life has also become more challenging for academics, stress-related illness is increasingly common and the level of mental health problems in the sector is higher than many other professional groups.

This article reports the findings of our recent study that explored the prevalence of presenteeism in academics, the factors that underpin it and the implications for their wellbeing and performance.

Do academics work when ill?

An online survey was completed by 5,209 academic employees working in UK universities. Just under half of the sample (49 percent) reported that they work while sick either often or always. Only around one respondent in 10 never does so.

When they do take time off sick, most academics we surveyed (92 percent) indicated that they continue to do some work at home at least occasionally and more than 20 percent always do so.

Why do academics work when ill?

Academics appear to work while sick for several reasons. Those who find their work more demanding, who feel less

supported by their managers and their co-workers, and who lack control over the timing and pacing of their work, are particularly likely to engage in presenteeism.

Our previous research has found that academics tend to be deeply involved in their work and are reluctant to disengage from it.

Job involvement also appears to be a key driver of presenteeism, as academics whose work was more central to their identity were more likely to continue to work while sick.

More in-depth information on the reasons for presenteeism was provided by respondents:

- Workload pressure and the increasingly diverse nature of academic roles
- No entitlement to sick pay and uncertainty over future employment (it should be noted that a high proportion of UK academics are on casual contracts)
- Lack of cover for sickness absence or, when cover is available, feelings of guilt about adding to colleagues' workloads that are already high
- Tight deadlines for reporting key teaching and research outcomes that must be met
- Inability to reschedule classes or meetings such as

examination boards that will have been set long in advance

- Feelings of responsibility to students who would be disadvantaged if the syllabus is not covered, or if their work remains unmarked
- Concerns about the impact of sickness on the results of student satisfaction surveys that have implications for career progression

We found that academics with more job control are less likely to work during periods of sickness – even when they are experiencing high demand.

Moving into the 'twilight world'

Nonetheless, the autonomy and flexibility that is central to academia seems to allow people to occupy a 'twilight world' – they feel too unwell to go into work, but not sick enough to stop working entirely.

This is illustrated by one respondent's comment: 'I wouldn't survive a day at the university but it is easy to sit in bed and work on my laptop, as I can rest when I need to.'

Respondents frequently considered it to be in their best interests to read work emails while signed off sick, as this allows them to keep in touch with what is going on and reduce the size of their inbox when they 'officially' return to work.



Others revealed that they continued to work during periods of serious illness, when undergoing debilitating treatment such as chemotherapy, or even during hospitalisation, even though they were officially signed off sick.

Several reasons were provided for this, such as pressure of work, the need for intellectual stimulation and feelings of being 'addicted' to work.

Some respondents disclosed that they missed aspects of their work too much to stay away from it.

The effects of presenteeism in academics

Sometimes continuing to do some work when unwell can be beneficial, provided people can choose whether or not to do so and are able to work within their limits.

Of some concern, however, was our finding that academics who work during periods of sickness tend to be more emotionally exhausted and have a poorer work/life balance.

The findings of other research that highlights the long-term consequences of presenteeism for job satisfaction, work engagement and performance, as well as health and the quality of personal life, indicates that the risks of presenteeism should be recognised by individuals as well as organisations.



About the authors

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Gail Kinman is Professor of Occupational Health Psychology at the University of Bedfordshire, a chartered psychologist and an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. Her research interests focus on work-related stress, work/life balance, emotional labour and emotional literacy and how they influence the wellbeing of employees, their clients/customers/students and their families.

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