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Effective absence management (Reply)

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reply

We welcome the comments of Dr Preece, as we intended to start a discussion on the management of sickness absence. We fully agree with Dr Preece that sickness presenteeism should not be used as a justification of not managing sickness absence. However, we are concerned about the mere reduction of sickness absence. A growing number of organizations have policies that focus heavily on work attendance despite illness and put pressure on line managers to manage work attendance. Similar concerns were reported earlier by Munir *et al.* [1], who stated that strict and inflexible attendance management would have detrimental impact on employees with chronic disease. We assume that this also applies to sick-listed employees: extorting work attendance or penalizing sickness absence will ultimately have adverse effects on employee well-being, health and sickness absence.

Indeed, there are ways to prudently manage sickness absence either by accommodating work (e.g. by adjusting work load and tasks) or by interventions aimed at increasing an employee's work ability. Such practices are frequently prescribed in organizational policies, but it remains a question whether these practices are adhered to. Ossmann *et al.* [2] showed that supervisors and employees differ in their interpretation of sickness absence policies and practices, especially in small and non-unionized companies. Managers' ratings were consistently higher and it was concluded that the less optimistic responses of employees were likely to be shaped by their experiences.

Besides, it is our opinion that policies and practices cannot endlessly reduce sickness absence. There must be a turning point after which further reduction of sickness absence inadvertently leads to sickness presenteeism.

Bergström *et al.* [3] assessed sickness presenteeism by a single question, asking how often people had gone to work despite the feeling that they really should have taken sick leave. This question does not measure whether or not employees perform below par because of illness, but the authors stated that they did not intend to consider sickness presenteeism from an economic or productivity perspective. Moreover, the single question has been used in earlier research on sickness presenteeism [4,5]. Although the prospective results of Bergström *et al.* [3] are tentative, they support the importance of including sickness presenteeism in the evaluation of measures or interventions to reduce sickness absence.

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