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Sharon Fletcher

Practice Manager at Ravat & Ray Dental Care, Burnley. Winner: Practice Manager of the Year 2014

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Focus on...Legal

What to do when an employee calls in sick



It can be frustrating when one of your team calls in sick. However, it's important to understand the correct procedures relating to staff sickness so that you can deal with the whole team fairly and consistently. Employment and HR Solicitor, SARAH BUXTON is on hand with some valuable guidance for Practice Managers.

It is often the case that for the practice manager and the rest of the team, when an employee calls in sick it can be frustrating and you feel let down. However, all Practice Managers should be aware of the procedural and legal issues which might affect the way in which they deal with an employee reporting in sick.

Practice managers will usually be the first point of contact for employees calling in sick, although in some practices the principal dentist may have this role. Whoever is the point of contact for employees off sick should receive appropriate training in taking responsibility for their role in the employer's reporting procedure.

They should also be trained to deal sympathetically with staff and to question them appropriately so that they have sufficient information to recognise any issues which may require further enquires or follow-up action.

In most situations, it will be appropriate to ask the employee the reason for their absence and the likely date of return. For example, an absence which an employee puts down to a cold or flu will be likely to last only a few days and may be an isolated occurrence, but if a particular employee is frequently off work due to colds there may be some underlying cause which has not yet been identified.

After a number of occurrences, it may be appropriate to question the employee regarding the medical treatment they are receiving. Equally a practice manager should consider whether an absence might have been triggered by an incident at work, which the employee is reluctant to take any further but which may require further investigation.

Having an effective policy in place will assist employers and practice managers to deal with absences consistently and

effectively as well as putting employees on notice as to the standards of attendance and reporting that the employer expects from them. However, an employee will be unlikely to have the policy to hand when they are on sick leave, so their manager should take the opportunity to remind them of key points as and when necessary during discussions. When the employee returns to work, investigations into the reasons for an employee's absence should always be handled sensitively and are best initiated by way of holding a return to work interview.

This step is often missed during the absence but is of high importance because it will ensure that the manager and the employee has the opportunity to discuss the absence, the impact on the rest of the team, and whether there is another underlying reason for the absence such as bullying at work or pregnancy etc. If so, the manager will be able to investigate further.

Sickness Absence can be one of the biggest headaches of running and managing a dental practice, so you should tackle it head on and seek advice when doing so. ■

Sarah Buxton

Sarah is a Director and Employment & HR Solicitor at FTA Law, who specialise in acting for the dental industry. The Team at FTA Law advise Dental Principals, Associates and Practice Managers on all of the legal aspects of buying, selling and running dental practices.

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