

In the Know....

Supporting employees through cancer



A report recently published by cancer charity MacMillan suggests that almost 1 in 5 cancer sufferers are subject to discrimination when they return to work. Here, we take a look at how employers may support employees at this time.

Every year, over 100,000 people of working age in the UK are diagnosed with cancer. This news is likely to have a devastating effect on the individual as they try to come to terms with their diagnosis. Continuing with work is often a realistic prospect and, for some, carrying on with normality is important and essential to their ongoing health. It is vital that employers are aware of their employee's circumstances so they can support them through their illness.

How should employers approach the subject?

Once employers have knowledge of the employee's diagnosis, an important first step is to meet with the employee in private to discuss their health. Unfortunately, this meeting is likely to be sensitive and difficult, for both employer and employee, but it is crucial; simply talking to the employee will help them feel supported at work. To ensure the employee is comfortable at the meeting, they can be offered the opportunity to bring along a colleague. This meeting should be used to discuss the diagnosis; who needs to be told in the business; the likely impact of cancer treatment; if any time off needs to be agreed immediately and whether any changes can be made at this stage.

Automatic protection from discrimination

Discussing changes and amendments to the employee's work or working practices is important throughout the illness. Employers should recognise that the employee will be affected in different ways at different stages and this may require changing amendments previously made as their illness and treatment progresses. Cancer is automatically

classed as a disability under the Equality Act. This means that employers are under a duty to make reasonable adjustments to change the employee's job, equipment and working practices to reduce any disadvantages they face because they're suffering from cancer. Reasonable adjustments can be as simple as changing the start time because the employee has to take medication every morning which makes them drowsy or amending absence policies to remove absences caused by cancer. These adjustments don't have to cost a lot but will make a big difference to the employee as it allows them to continue in work.

The return to work

As treatment progresses, it is likely that the employee will have to take some time off work. Returning to work can be a daunting experience for an employee going through this life changing experience. No pressure should be put on the employee to return to work but, when they are fit to come back to work, it is beneficial to agree a phased or reduced hours return in a return to work interview. A phased return reduces the possibility of the employee going off work ill because they feel overwhelmed or stressed about coming back in to the workplace. Support, flexibility and constant communication is crucial at this stage to ensure a positive future for the employee at work.

The content of this briefing is correct at the time of publishing.

Please contact the 24 Hour Advice Service for advice on your specific situation before acting on the information in this publication.