

Independent  
Occupational  
Physician

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*The Regional Strategy Team*  
*C4 Castle Buildings*  
*Stormont*  
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Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: A Healthier Future – Response of the Northern Ireland Forum of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine**

**Introduction and Context**

The Northern Ireland Forum of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine is the regional representative body of the Faculty. There are some 16 occupational medicine consultants in Northern Ireland the majority of whom work in the public sector and the HPSS. There are also 29 general practitioners and other doctors who hold Faculty qualifications.

**Mission of the Faculty**

The Mission of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine is that “everyone should have access to advice from a competent occupational physician as part of comprehensive occupational health and safety services”

The aim of the Faculty is for healthy working lives through:

- Elimination of preventable workplace disease
- Maximisation of functional capacity
- Adaptation of work to suit the needs of the individual

The Forum welcomes the proposals contained in “A Healthier Future” and considers that, if effectively executed, they will improve the health of the public. There are a number of areas on which the Forum wishes to make specific comment and these are included below.

### **Faculty Position Paper on Smoking and Work**

In its position paper *Smoking and Work* the Faculty of Occupational Medicine argues for a smoking ban in all enclosed places of work. This is so as the Faculty is not convinced of the effectiveness of partial smoking bans which it describes as “confusing to the public, difficult to enforce and likely to perpetuate health inequalities”. In relation to smoking the Faculty also recognises the particular vulnerability of workers in the hospitality industry.

In reaching this position the Faculty has been influenced by the accumulating body of evidence on the health effects of passive smoking. It also notes that evidence for a safe level of exposure to environmental tobacco smoke is lacking and that little evidence exists for promoting smoke-free areas or ventilation as appropriate means of protection. The Forum is also of the opinion that employers can make a real contribution to tackling health inequalities if smoking is banned. For all of these reasons the Forum supports option C namely a total smoking ban.

### **A Healthier Future: Engagement**

The Forum also welcomes the principle of engagement or partnership described in the proposals. It recognises the benefits of a similar approach in workplaces provided this is underpinned by practices which are evidence-based. Engagement for health between the working community and the larger HPSS family and community groups is also something which the Forum advocates, particularly in the area of occupational health support. Its members employed in both the public and private sectors will wish to contribute to the responsive integrated services which “A Healthier Future” describes.

### **Strategic Lead**

The Forum is concerned that in Northern Ireland the health of people at work including those wishing to work has received insufficient emphasis. Whilst mindful of developments in *Working for Health* we would argue for a still greater emphasis on the health of people at work. We note the advances which have taken place in Scotland a country with similar health and inequality issues to those in Northern Ireland following its investment in the health of people at work and suggest that consideration be given to a similar approach in Northern Ireland.

### **Chronic Disease Management**

The Forum welcomes proposals which aim to improve the management of chronic diseases and notes the reference in the strategy to the impact which

these conditions have on work. Whilst the workplace management of all health conditions are a priority for our Faculty we note and welcome the priority given to musculoskeletal problems and psychological ill health. The proposals for Chronic Condition Management Programmes and responsive integrated services are both relevant to occupational medicine practice and we look forward to playing our part alongside other partners. We suggest that to realise healthy working lives there will need to be a renewed emphasis on rehabilitation both medical and vocational. We argue for a seamless transition from ill health back to a healthy working life using a person centred approach.

### **Mental Well-being**

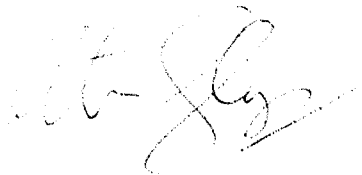
The Forum is aware of the stigma which employers attach to disability particularly in the sphere of psychological ill health. Protecting mental well-being and promoting working environments which seek to promote mental health are central to our practice and we look forward to the outcome of the review of Mental Health and Learning disability. In aiming to be responsive to the mental health needs of those working communities that we serve we recognise the importance of leadership, advocacy and the business case

### **HPSS as an Employer**

Access to competent occupational health support can make an important contribution to work and the work environment. The Forum welcomes the commitment to improving the lives of HPSS staff and envisages an expanded role for occupational health services if this vision is to be realised. The ongoing commitment of the HPSS to activities which seek to employ individuals at risk of being excluded from the labour market is to be commended. Occupational health services will seek to provide any added workplace health support to such individuals where required.

Yours faithfully

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