

Guidance for employing an Occupational Health Nurse



This guide is intended to help you understand the role of the occupational health nurse and to recruit suitable individuals based on the level of occupational health advice, services and support you need.



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What is occupational health?

Quite simply, occupational health is about the effect of health on work and work on health. Occupational health practitioners enable employers to meet their legal, ethical and moral obligations for the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

There are four main functions that occupational health nurses provide:

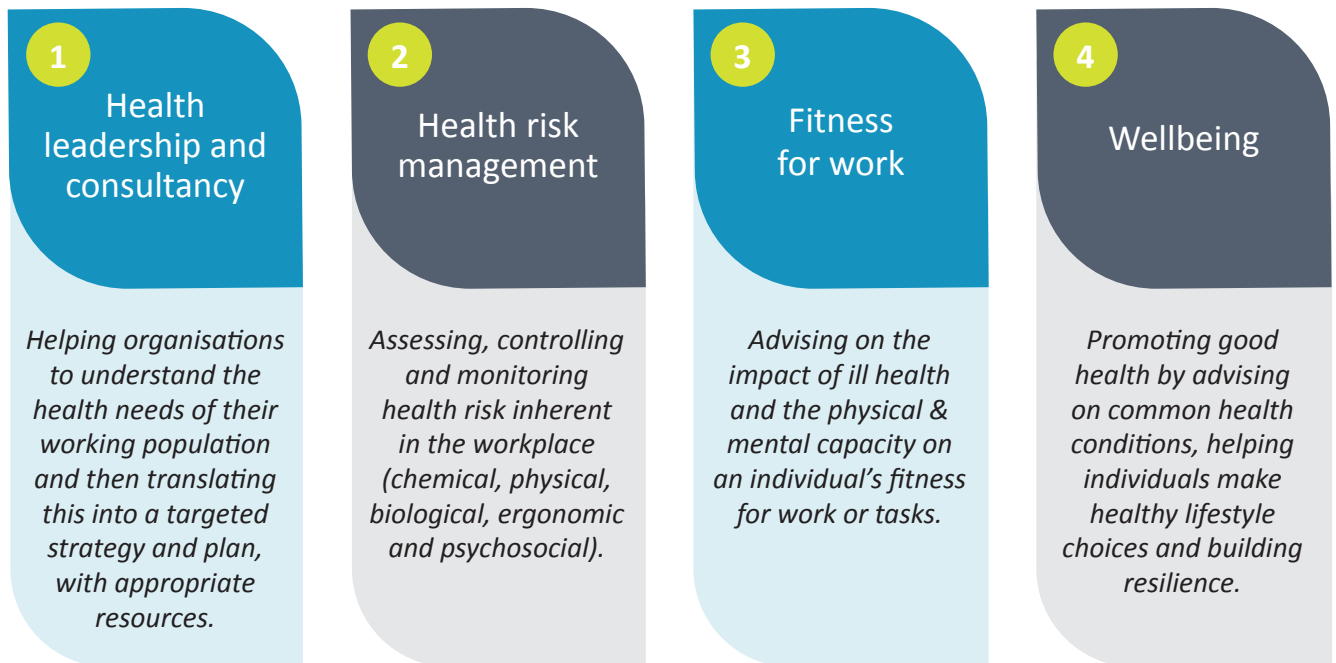


Fig 1: Multidisciplinary work and health team



Employers' duties

Employers have a legal, ethical and moral duty to care for the health and wellbeing of their workforce – their most valuable asset. Occupational health nurses can support employers in understanding these duties and putting into place the necessary arrangements to achieve a healthy organisation.

Legal - employers must protect employees and those affected by their activities, from the risks of foreseeable injury, disease, or death at work. Other legal requirements include the protection of health data, treating employees equally, working hours and other health related regulations.

Ethical - employers operate by a set of business principles or values and these also apply to how they manage the health and wellbeing of their employees as well as supporting the professional ethics of the occupational health nurse and other advisers.

Moral - employers should ensure that the overriding duty to 'care' for their employees is embedded in the organisation.

By managing health and wellbeing in the workplace, employers will benefit from a reduction in potential harm, improvement in health, and a reduction in ill health related costs. The employee and employer will also benefit from improved productivity, better job satisfaction and employee engagement.



What is an occupational health nurse?

Occupational health nurse is a broad term given to nurses employed in a workplace setting. Some occupational health nurses may be called occupational health advisers.

To practice lawfully all nurses must hold a current and valid registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), the regulatory body which exists to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the public. Some nurses also gain a specialist qualification that is recorded on the NMC register and which is a protected title; Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN). SCPHN (OH) means that they have completed specialist training in the field of occupational health.

All nurses must practice to a professional Code published by the NMC which contains professional standards that must be upheld. This commitment to professional standards is fundamental to being part of the profession. It includes a requirement to continually learn and develop, through revalidation. The NMC provide guidance to employers on responsibilities for employing nurses and ensuring they meet their requirements for revalidation.

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/registration/guidance-for-employers/>

Nurses practising in an occupational health setting should have the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to perform the requirements of the role. Ideally, they should hold a specialist qualification or work under the supervision of a specialist occupational health nurse or physician. Qualifications can be at post graduate degree, diploma or certificate level.

There is no legal requirement for a nurse to hold any of these qualifications to practice in occupational health, but it makes sound business practice to employ suitable professionals to ensure safe, effective and good quality services, taking into account the nature of the business and the specific role.

You wouldn't employ a mechanical engineer to do the work of a chemical engineer.

Christina Butterworth, FOHN Board

OH nurses might be:

- ✓ Nurses who have many years of experience in OH practice, but no specific OH qualification
- ✓ Nurses who have completed an OH course or other training (often to master's level) which is not recognised by the NMC
- ✓ Nurses who have an OH qualification recognised by the NMC (SCPHN(OH), recorded on Part 3 of the register)) but no OH experience
- ✓ Registered nurses or registered mental health nurses
- ✓ Nurses who have additional qualifications in other relevant fields including health & safety, occupational hygiene, psychology, teaching, research

Where an inexperienced OH nurse is available to work, it is better that they work as part of a team of nurses; experienced OH Nurses can work alone or alongside other OH professionals. Successful delivery of an OH service, whether by an OH Nurse or by a team of OH professionals, is determined by the culture of the organisation, its recognition of its OH risks, its willingness to comply with appropriate OH programmes and risk controls as well as the competence of the provider.

Career pathways for Occupational Health Nurses

An OH Nurse in practice can be assessed on six levels:

LEVEL	What can they do?	What knowledge, skills etc
1 Associate practitioner	Carry out occupational health activities guided by standard operating procedures, protocols or systems of work	Registered nurse Additional skills training Supervised by qualified OH practitioner
2 Practitioner	In addition to above, can make specialist clinical judgements, provide technical advice and support. Recommends service development.	Registered nurse Additional skills training Demonstrable experience Hold a specialist post graduate qualification (not SCPHN) or working toward a post graduate qualification.
3 Senior practitioner	In addition to above, have detailed theoretical and practical knowledge. They are specialists who may have management or leadership capabilities. Responsible for performance and development of service.	Registered nurse Hold a specialist post graduate qualification with expertise in occupational health nursing.
4 Advanced practitioner	In addition to above, can make decisions on service delivery in complex and unpredictable environments. Critical awareness of knowledge in occupational health and interface with wider organisation.	Registered nurse Post registration qualification in occupational health. Evidence of operating/thinking at Master's level.
5 Consultant	Highly specialised knowledge and experience, some of which is at the forefront of occupational health. Conduct or high-level interpretation of research and practice. Leaders in the field, through service delivery, research or education.	Registered nurse Post registration qualification in occupational health. Advanced leadership and management skills
6 Director	Most advanced practitioners in the field of occupational health. Responsibility for development and service delivery at highest level of the organisation	

The levels used are not usually the role title adopted by the individual nurse or the organisation but act as a guide to level of knowledge, experience and responsibility.



Occupational Health Nurse Competencies

An employer should determine what level of occupational health advice and support they need for their organisation and appoint a nurse who has the necessary competence, i.e. the knowledge, skills and experience to undertake responsibility for and perform activities to a recognised standard.

The exact competencies required will depend on the nature of the employer's business and the scope of the role.

Competent: can be defined as having the necessary ability, knowledge or skill to do something successfully

Competence: is the ability to undertake responsibility for and perform activities to a recognised standard on a regular basis. It combines practical and thinking skills, knowledge and experience.

The NMC Code mandates that nurses recognise and work within their level of competence. This would prove difficult for an inexperienced or unqualified OH nurse to do and will restrict their practice.

Health & Safety Considerations

When conducting health surveillance for potential exposure to noise, chemicals and vibration, employers should appoint one or more competent people to assist them in undertaking the measures necessary to comply with the law.

The Working Time Regulations 1998 require a health assessment for night workers and the Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992 and Manual Handling Operations Regulations require non-statutory health monitoring.

In some circumstances the health monitoring role can be fulfilled by one of the employees/workers, by specialist professionals, either from within the organisation or external. The decision on who fulfils this role is determined by the inherent health and safety risks of the organisation.

Occupational physicians should be appointed if medical surveillance is required

Occupational physicians should be appointed to conduct medical surveillance.

Establishing an occupational health service

What should an employer look for when employing an OH Nurse?

The occupational health nurse should be registered with the NMC.

The employer should take reasonable steps to arrange for a competent assessment of their occupational health needs. They can then decide who will provide the OH nursing service and, in discussion with the individual/provider, determine the scope of the provision. For a complex or high-risk organisation it is recommended that a needs assessment is conducted by a competent nurse or doctor.

Having assessed the occupational needs of the organisation and the level of OH nurse required to perform the necessary workplace health activities; the employer will need to find an appropriate person. There is currently no single list of OH nurses that employers can go to, but an online search can list different types of provider from large companies to single providers. (The following checks could form part of the initial needs assessment).



Delivery of occupational health nursing services

It is essential that occupational health has a Board level champion and support from the senior management team, with policy, procedures and service delivery standards.

In small and medium enterprises this may be one of the management team or the local manager. Day to day responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the employees sits with the line managers, with specialist advice and support from the occupational health service. The OH service can support the line manager by:

- ✓ Having access and influence at senior level
- ✓ Being proactive in employee policy development where it relates to workplace health
- ✓ Working collaboratively with management
- ✓ Using data effectively to carry out health assessments and identify problems requiring early intervention
- ✓ Having a structured approach to health & wellbeing within the organisation, using the business, industry or national standards
- ✓ Maintaining professional accountability

See appendix for OH nursing activities

Managers may refer employees to OH for advice on health conditions which are affecting (or might affect) an employee's ability to work effectively and /or efficiently.

All occupational health services should have in place quality assurance arrangements. These include:

- Clinical audit
- Customer survey
- Benchmarking
- Accreditation i.e. SEQOHS, ISO9001

Occupational health nurses are change agents who influence at strategic and industry level, thinking globally but acting locally, to create a healthy workforce for the present and the future.

Deborah Edmonds,
FOHN specialist adviser

Conclusion

An occupational health nurse can help to reduce the healthcare costs of an organisation, whether small or large, by identifying and helping to manage the effects of work-relevant health problems. They can influence the policy and decision makers and can implement early interventions. They can assist employers to manage their legal, ethical, and moral responsibilities and contribute to improved lives, (see 'Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability' DWP, DHSC Policy Paper 2017).



Appendix 1

OH Nurse activities

OH nurses are leaders of public health and care in the workplace.

They specialise in the health and wellbeing of people at work. Their role could include the following:



- Assessing and determining the health profile of a population
- Identifying and preventing work-related health problems
- Providing advice and guidance on workplace health management
- Providing or supporting health risk assessment and risk management
- Monitoring and surveillance as part of hazard control
- Providing fitness for work health assessment and capability
- Attendance management and rehabilitation
- Promoting healthy living and working conditions
- Providing health education and promotion
- Providing education and training on health in the workplace
- Providing guidance and signposting to specialist support
- Ensuring good Record keeping, confidentiality and data protection
- Clinical activities as appropriate such as public health activities (e.g. flu prevention campaigns, managing disease outbreaks, infection control), drug and alcohol testing, emergency response/crisis management, immunisations for clinical work or overseas travel
- Auditing the quality and effectiveness of the service
- Conducting workplace research

Nurse register: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/registration/search-the-register/>



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research and evidence-based practice of all occupational health nurses.*