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Nicky is the owner of HR Support Consultancy. She has a BA(Hons) in Business Studies, is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and has been a practising HR manager for more than 20 years. HR Support Consultancy has provided the BVNA Members Advisory Service (formerly known as the Industrial Relations Service) since it began in 2002.

Fit Notes

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'Sick Notes' were replaced by Fit Notes in 2010.

It used to be the case that when you were ill, you were either fit to work, or not to fit to work and a 'Sick Note' would be issued if you were considered not fit to work.

Research has shown that in general, work is good for us. It is good for us physically, mentally and can often relieve the pressure of financial difficulties that being off work sick can bring.

It is also the case that in many cases, whilst we are not fully well, we can continue to work, indeed being at work can often aid our recovery.

A Fit Note aims to focus on what an employee may be able do at work rather than what they cannot do.

Your own GP will usually give you a Fit Note, but if you are in hospital a hospital doctor may issue it. The fit note is classed as advice from your doctor. You do not need a Fit Note until you have been absent from work for 7 days, you can certify your own absence for a period of up to seven days. Your employer can also use the information on your Fit Note for Statutory Sick Pay purposes. Your Fit Note belongs to you, but it can be helpful for your employer to take a copy.

When you talk to your doctor about your illness, your doctor will decide whether you are not fit for work of any kind, whether you are fully fit (in which case you will not be given a Fit Note) or whether you may be fit for work taking account of their advice. This will involve a general discussion with your doctor about the work that you do, and it is important that you understand the advice your doctor is giving.

There are some tick boxes on the fit note for the doctor to use,

- A phased return to work,
- Altered hours,
- Amended duties,
- Workplace adaptations,

There is also space for the doctor to make any comments - "may be fit for work taking account of the following advice".

Obviously, our jobs are all different and the boxes ticked and any suggestions made are just a guide. They are not legally binding and they are to help you and your employer see if there a way you can return to work before you are fully well again. You should discuss any information on the Fit Note with your employer, in many cases the temporary adjustments can be made and you can return to work. It some cases the employer may not be able to make the adjustments, in which case you will not be able to return to work. The fit note is advisory and not legally binding on your employer.

You can go back to work at any time you feel well enough (even if this is before the end of the fit note) without going back to see your doctor - even if your doctor has indicated that they need to assess you again.

Working with your employer in terms of managing your sickness is the best way forward, but you are still entitled for your medical information to be dealt with in confidence by your employer.

If your sickness lasts for some weeks or the adjustments are required for an extended period of time, your employer may seek more advice from an Occupational Health Advisor who would normally provide a more extensive report.

For further support with this or any other HR issue, BVNA members can call the BVNA Advisory Service Helpline on 01822 870270 or email nickyackerley@hrsupportconsultancy.co.uk.

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