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Occupational Health Nurses Increase Bottom Line

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BENEFITS

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As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2015), “Occupational Health deals with all aspects of health and safety in the workplace and has a strong focus on primary prevention of hazards.”

Occupational Health and Safety in Canada is impacted by the rules from the ministries of health, labour, and environment which govern it. Occupational health nurses (OHNs) are an integral part of any successful occupational health and safety program. Their focus is on keeping workers well (both physically and psychologically) and assisting them to achieve an optimal level of health, while treating workplace illness and injury and managing timely and safe return to work.

What OHNs Do

Occupational health nurses are not ‘Band-Aid nurses.’ They are registered nurses, licensed/registered practical nurses, or nurse practitioners who, depending on the need of their employer, have additional accreditation in any number of health and safety areas. Everything the OHN does falls within the ‘Four Pillars of Occupational Health Nursing:’

- ◆ Disability management
- ◆ Workplace health promotions and wellness
- ◆ Health and safety promotion management
- ◆ Business strategies for legislative compliance in the workplace

If the workplace is affecting an employee’s health or if the employee’s health

is affecting their work, then the intervention of an OHN will make a difference.

Enhance Bottom Line

To remain competitive, workplaces must reduce costs with a common purpose: a healthy, productive, and profitable workplace and workforce. OHNs contribute significantly to a company’s healthy bottom line as they have the expertise to identify problems and propose solutions within budget constraints. They assess hazards, provide early intervention for risk management, and are the employer/employee champions, eliminating unnecessary stress and providing clear policy direction. They are key in helping an employer create a supportive environment which fosters behavioural changes focused on the ever-changing needs of the organization.

Leading employers have come to recognize the importance of enhanced employee health, safety, and wellness as a major factor resulting from employing an in-house OHN. The benefits far outweigh their costs as OHNs are highly skilled health professionals who can help maximize employee productivity, reduce costs by effectively lowering disability claims, reduce on-the-job injuries and absenteeism, and improve employee health and safety, resulting in lower turnover and increased profits.

For many years the focus of productive and healthy workplaces has been on eliminating physical injuries. Employers are now becoming increasingly responsible to provide a psychologically healthy work environment:

- ◆ Amendments to Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act in 2010 recognized psychological wellbeing in the workplace as another dimension of workplace health and safety.
- ◆ In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association’s voluntary ‘National Standard of Canada on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace’ received national exposure and helped to significantly increase employer awareness of a

mentally healthy workplace.

- ◆ April 2016, Ontario passed legislation that created a presumption that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosed in first responders are work-related.
- ◆ Most recently in January 2018, Ontario’s Bill 127, Section 13 of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act was amended to include chronic mental stress.

Good mental health is recognized as being key to healthy and productive workplaces as employers realize that physical health and mental wellbeing go hand in hand. Organizations like the Mental Health Commission have programs and campaigns supported by major Canadian companies and business leaders such as Bell’s ‘Let’s Talk.’ These initiatives are breaking down barriers and reducing stigma to bring mental health out of the dark.

Employers are recognizing that the OHN is their most valuable onsite resource to champion, manage, and coordinate their mental health programs. They distinguish themselves from other health and safety specialists as their nursing background provides the natural foundation of trust that is required for any successful wellness program, especially one focused on mental health.

For many years the focus of productive and healthy workplaces has been on eliminating physical injuries. Now, employers realize that physical health and mental well-being go hand in hand to make healthy and productive workplaces.

A company that purposefully maintains and improves the health and safety of employees is perceived by its employees as a company that cares and is a good place to work. The onsite occupational health nurse is key to maximizing the benefits of an effective health and safety program. **BPM**

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