

Evaluation of online learning module about sickness certification for general practitioners

By Trine Larsen and Linda Jenkins

In 2004, following the Government's Green Paper 'Pathways to Work' (DWP 2002), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) introduced the first of a series of online learning modules on the DWP Corporate Medical Group's (CMG's) website. The module, *Sickness Certification Made Easy*, aimed to improve the quality and accuracy of sickness certification by GPs.

This evaluation looked at how well the initial module met its objectives of helping GPs with sickness certification and improving the quality of advice provided by doctors on fitness for work. Face-to-face interviews were carried out with doctors who had used the module, and findings were analysed using qualitative research methods. The evaluation aimed to find out the user experience and impact of the first online learning module, and discover how it might be improved and promoted.

- Doctors in the evaluation found the module met a wide variety of their learning and teaching needs. The content was seen as relevant and reliable, and generally of the right level.
- The scenarios and quizzes were seen as particularly effective teaching methods.
- As well as the module itself, other learning tools, such as desk aids and a DVD were offered. These were seen as useful, although the DVDs had not been widely used.
- Medical certification is not well covered in doctors' training, and the evaluation found that doctors had become more knowledgeable and confident after using the learning module. Some had adopted a more systematic approach and had discussed medical certification with colleagues.

Key findings

- The module was used by a range of doctors, including GPs and occupational physicians.
- The method of learning was popular with those interviewed, and the layout and teaching style were generally found easy to use.
- Doctors liked the flexibility and accessibility of online learning which suited the limited time they had available: they tended to revisit the module a number of times for short periods, totalling one to two hours.
- The logging-in process was criticised as overly complex and some respondents reported broken links.

Recommendations

The evaluation generated a large number of suggestions to improve the usage and effectiveness of the module. These included better marketing and promotion, with more working links to other sites. Doctors suggested that the material be extended to help them with the more complex scenarios they face, and wanted to be stretched by increasing the difficulty of quizzes. They also wanted modules on other allowances and benefits. They made various suggestions about the clarity and accessibility of the module and the supporting materials.

Doctors saw the module as playing a part in raising the profile of sickness certification, and addressing a gap in medical training.

Summary of research

Background to research

The Government's Green Paper 'Pathways to Work' (DWP 2002) was part of the Welfare to Work strategy. It outlined plans to provide better support and incentives to return to work for people with health problems or disabilities. It identified the vital role that general practitioners play in providing advice to patients on fitness for work and providing medical certificates. Further, it pledged to provide a website for general practitioners on sickness certification and fitness for work issues, in order to improve the quality of advice provided by general practitioners.

This report describes an evaluation of the first online learning module on the DWP CMG website, namely 'Sickness Certification Made Easy' covering medical certification. The specific aims of the evaluation were to assess attitudes to, and experience of using the module and supporting materials, to identify areas for improvement, and to gather opinions on effective ways of promoting the tools and encouraging general practitioners to use them.

Research method

The evaluation was based on 20 face-to-face interviews with users of the online learning module. Names were taken from the database of registered users of the website who were willing to be contacted. The group of respondents consisted of 14 general practitioners, four occupational physicians, one geriatrician and one medical manager.

The interviews with doctors lasted up to an hour, and were taped, fully transcribed and analysed. Findings from the interviews are described in four main themes: knowledge and usage of the module; teaching content; style of teaching and module layout; and the impact it had on the way medical certificates were issued.

How the learning module was used

The majority of users were general practitioners. However, a number of other doctors also used the online learning module including occupational physicians. Given the acknowledged gap in medical training about medical certification, it was not surprising that the material met a wide range of needs, with some finding it a valuable learning aid, and others using it to reinforce their knowledge and keep up to date. It was quite widely used by the more experienced general practitioners in their teaching.

Doctors had usually spent short periods of time totalling one to two hours on the module, which was in keeping with the fact that most general practitioners saw medical certification as a low profile issue. Many had completed the module, had done some of the quizzes and were interested in further modules. Although general practitioners with less than five years' experience made up a large proportion of those interviewed in the evaluation, the time spent on the module and the assessments completed did not seem to vary with users' years of experience in general practice.

Doctors' views

The content of the module was seen as highly relevant, appropriate and reliable. In real-life, patients posed difficult or complex issues, and doctors asked for scenarios that better reflected the more complicated cases they faced. Doctors also asked for the material to be extended to cover other medical certificates, allowances and benefits.

Users thought that the module had not been effectively marketed and they had generally found it by chance. They would have preferred to be directed to it or officially informed about it, and their ability to get started on the module would have been helped if there had been more working links to and from the module. The login process was also a major source of frustration that easily led to loss of interest in the module.

Participants in the research liked online learning and were complimentary about the module's style. Apart from the odd criticism about formal language or a particular navigational issue, they found it simple and easy to use. They particularly liked the use of scenarios to demonstrate how the rules of medical certification worked in practice. The desk aids were useful, but few had taken the time to look at the DVDs. It was also suggested that doctors would like using training material if it was made available as a software programme on a CD.

After spending time on the module, doctors felt more knowledgeable and confident about medical certification, and by using the information and desk aids they approached the task in a more systematic way. Younger general practitioners reported some changes, both to the way they completed certificates, and the volume issued.

A number of recommendations have emerged from the evaluation.

Recommendations

Ways of increasing awareness and use:

- Simplify the login process and repair broken links and sites.
- Better advertising in terms of liaising with BMJ learning and Doctors.net, promoting the module continuously in magazines, pamphlets and journals as well as sending emails through PCTs, adding the DWP's website on medical certificates and handing out free gifts.

Ways of improving the teaching content:

- Add more difficult and complex quiz questions and scenarios.
- Increase the level of difficulty gradually throughout the module to keep the interest of all users.
- Simplify the desk aids by adding more graphs and flow charts.
- Change the content of the DVD 'Personal Capability Assessment' so it is more in

accordance with general practitioners' role in the sickness certification process.

- Clarify the content of the sections on PCA and MED4 so it is easier to understand.
- Add new online learning modules, for example on Maternity Allowance, Incapacity Benefit.
- Add a section on how to deal with complicated patients.
- Add a section on forgeries, RM7 and the MED6.

Ways of improving the module style and layout:

- Fully test modules before their launch.
- Consider greater linkage to and comparability with other online learning sites used by general practitioners.
- Simplify the language by making it less bureaucratic.
- Create a service where users can save their certificate of completion online.
- Make more downloads possible for reference, presentations or teaching.
- Improve DVDs or consider discontinuing them.
- Provide a training package of the module on CD to be used in different teaching settings.

Ways of increasing the impact:

- Include information that acknowledges the dilemmas general practitioners face, and help to deal with the conflict of interests in relation to medical certification.
- Make greater use of general practitioners who have used the module to promote it through discussion and recommendation.
- Consider strengthening mechanisms to check that general practitioners issue medical certificates appropriately.
- Make the module compulsory for general practitioners or integrate it into the registrar training curriculum.
- Instigate a large-scale survey to assess the impact of the module.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 926 7. Research Report 304. December 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

You can also download this report free from:
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Paul Noakes, Strategic Research and Modelling Division, 4th Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.
E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk