

## Information Resource Sheet No.2

# MODEL HUMAN RESOURCE GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING A PERSON AT WORK WITH A LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS

### Introduction to guidelines

#### New challenges for employers/managers

Improved treatment for people with life-threatening illnesses now means they are able to continue working for longer periods. When a staff member is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, there are various aspects of their illness and responses to the illness by other staff or clients that may require management.

There are also many reasons why those with a life-threatening illness wish to continue their employment. Being able to work is important in:

- Maintaining an important part of their identity.
- Keeping a sense of order and control in an uncertain environment.
- Earning income to pay for treatment.
- Providing for their family.

The trajectory of a life-threatening illness will change over time. The challenge for employers and those responsible for managing staff is to be aware when these changes in the illness's course create issues that require management of the ill person in their employment, and/or other staff and the organisation's business.

#### The need for human resource guidelines

These guidelines are to help employers identify the range of human resource issues arising from employment of a person with a life-threatening illness. The guidelines recognise the sensitive nature of this task due to the many ambiguous and uncertain situations caused by the unfolding of an illness and its impact on the ill person, managers, employees and the organisation's business.

#### The purpose of these guidelines

The guidelines aim to provide direction for human resource managers to respond to the needs of the ill person, all employees and the production needs of the business by:

- Understanding the experience of each party in the workplace.
- Accepting the increased need for attention to economic, information, emotional and appraisal support needs at work brought about by the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness for an employee.
- Develop procedures in consultation with supervisors/managers, the ill person, and employees to meet identified economic, information, emotional and appraisal support needs of each party in the workplace.
- Develop procedures to identify and resolve competing needs.

## **What is a life-threatening illness?**

A life-threatening illness is a medical diagnosis for diseases that may cause death. This does not mean that death is imminent, or inevitable. However, both the diagnosis and the disease may cause physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual changes for the ill person, their family, friends and managers and colleagues at work.

These changes may cause diverse support needs for each party in the workplace, including:

- Economic – the costs and benefits.
- Information – who needs to know what, and how.
- Emotional – managing the tough feelings
- Appraisal – what does it all mean?

## **Management planning for a life-threatening illness at work**

### A coordinated approach

Managing the human resource issues caused by a life-threatening illness to an employed person needs to coordinate an overall approach to production, occupational health and safety, health promoting, and human resource management issues.

### Inclusive planning

Both work systems and people may be affected in some way by the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness to a staff member. Planning should be as inclusive as practicable.

### Identify the needs

Identify the needs of the organisation, the ill person and your staff. (See 'Workplace assessment of diverse factors for managing a life-threatening illness'.)

### Identify constraints and opportunities

Identify your current constraints and opportunities.

- Do you have a budget for contracting staff, training, provision of information, access to support/counselling services, providing activities to build peer support?
- Will managing this illness impinge on existing production, occupational health and safety, health promoting and human resource policies? How?
- Identify existing opportunities and limitations within your organisation's existing production demands for dealing with a person with a life-threatening illness.
- Identify existing strengths and weaknesses amongst your organisation's existing programs and staff for dealing with a life-threatening illness.
- Are there resources you can access which may help you? (See 'Palliative care consultants resource list').

### Develop and adopt a policy

Develop a workable policy for your organisation on managing life-threatening illness. (See 'Model Company Policy')

### Develop and adopt a management plan

Develop a plan for the effective management of life-threatening illness for your organisation, based on your needs and resources, inclusive consultation with your workforce, and clear advice on when and how the plan will be used.

Your plan needs to ensure you:

- Understand the competing needs of production, occupational health and safety, health promotion, and human resource issues, and how they may be met at different times in either/both the production cycle and the illness trajectory.
- Provide a supportive work environment, including peer support, debriefing meetings, access to counselling, and mentor support on an ongoing basis for managers dealing with the ill person.
- Provide appropriate training and information that allows staff to explore issues arising from a life-threatening illness, and learn skills for dealing with such situations.
- Plan for the death of a staff member if an illness becomes terminal, including identifying the wishes of the staff person, their family, and staff.
- Consider the needs of special groups, such as the ill person's supervisor, work group, clients.
- Consider whether there are cultural/religious issues for any people, and how to manage them. When possible, these can be identified during the assessment of risk factors.