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Registrars' visit to south Auckland Work and Income an eye-opener

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Last month, GPEP1 registrars working at East Tamaki Healthcare visited Work and Income in Manurewa to learn more about a process their patients may need help with. Fiona Thomas joined in

Writing a medical certificate is akin to writing a prescription for a drug with significant side effects, East Tamaki Healthcare GP trainer Tane Taylor told registrars on a visit to Work and Income Manurewa last month.

It was the fifth time GPEP1 registrars working at ETHC clinics had paid a visit to the centre, in a partnership set up to help them understand their role in the Work and Income process.



David Bratt, health advisor for the Ministry of Social Development (third from left) and Tane Taylor, GP trainer, brought Work and Income staff and GP registrars together for a day

Eight GP registrars and one house officer visited the office for a question and answer session which included role plays and the "dos and don'ts" of granting medical certificates for the jobseeker benefit.

Present for the session was Ministry of Social Development principal health advisor David Bratt, along with health and disability coordinators and staff from the Manurewa centre.

Dr Bratt and Dr Taylor both emphasised to the registrars the importance of striking a balance between writing certificates and encouraging patients to return to work.

Time spent away from work or away from support services offered to active job seekers, such as language courses, does damage in the long term, they stressed.

Most GP registrars would never have set foot in a Work and Income office, he says, or know where the office was.

Dr Taylor says he would like to see a change in the culture of how medical certificates are treated, with greater

encouragement to help people with their medical difficulties and encourage them back to work.

It is not the role of GPs to assess whether there are enough jobs for people to go to, he says.

Questions posed by the registrars included what was the impact to patients if they didn't approve a medical certificate, how best to broach the subject of returning to work and how to break the cycle of cross-generational unemployment.

Mt Roskill registrar Dominique Chiu says the session was useful in giving her confidence about medical certificates. At times, younger doctors can feel taken advantage of for their lack of knowledge on the subject, she says.

Dr Bratt says the majority of people using the system are doing so correctly, but people can overestimate the impact of a health condition on their ability to work.

Health and disability coordinator for the Ministry of Social Development Sandi Field told the registrars whether clients have a medical certificate or not does not affect the amount of allowance they receive. What differs is Work and Income's expectations of them. If clients do not have a medical certificate, they should be actively looking for work and taking part in support activities offered by Work and Income.

ETHC Glen Innes registrar Ben Ling says he gets a lot of people seeking medical certificates at his practice and wants to avoid a culture of just handing them out.

Dr Ling has been in New Zealand for 10 years, and says he thinks it is a wonderful concept that the Government will support people while they look for work.

At the same time, he says he does not want to open the system up for abuse and found the workshop a good way to understand the options on offer to patients.

Registrar at Wai Health Clinic in Henderson Zulaiha Giado was happy to have any hazy details cleared up by those who understand the Work and Income system.

Dr Gaido found it particularly helpful to know that her decision would not be limiting the amount of money her patients could get.

Dr Bratt says there has been interest in the workshop from other regions and he would like to see it offered elsewhere.

In a written statement RNZCGP chief executive Helen Morgan-Banda says the college has seminars from Work and Income speakers in all regions, but visits are considered an elective and there are no plans to make them a compulsory part of the GPEP curriculum.

A second group of ETHC GP registrars will visit the centre in July for the next session.

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