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Covid-19: Pandemic sickness pay rules for NHS staff to come to an end

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The special arrangements that allowed full pay for NHS staff should they have to self-isolate or become ill with covid-19, however long they are off work, are being withdrawn this week, the Department of Health and Social Care has confirmed.

Temporary guidance introduced at the start of the pandemic meant that normal contractual rules were suspended and NHS staff were able to receive full pay when away from work as a result of covid, no matter the length of absence.

But from 7 July the pandemic guidance on sick pay will end, as will the pause that had been placed on covid related illness triggering absence management policies.

By 1 September 2022 all staff in receipt of covid sick pay will revert to the rules set out in the terms and conditions of their contract, and the NHS Staff Council will be publishing guidance for employers and staff on managing the transition.

Sickness periods that have been treated as covid and have not been counted towards normal sickness absence with regards to pay or sickness absence triggers up until 1 September will retain that status, the department confirmed.

Raymond Agius, BMA occupational medicine committee co-chair, said the decision was “completely unacceptable” and would put patients and staff at significant risk. “Healthcare workers are in harm’s way, caring for patients who are infected, and this vital provision helped ensure that they faced no detriment if they needed to self-isolate or became unwell with covid,” he said. “The removal of this provision will not only force many staff to continue working if symptomatic but may have a significant impact on their livelihoods if they develop long covid.”

He added that rapidly rising infection rates across the country¹ meant that the risk to staff remains very high.

“Staff under pressure to return to work in order to avoid loss in pay or other sanctions risk passing on infection to vulnerable patients and other staff while those with long covid who are suffering from fatigue, ‘brain fog,’ and other symptoms are at greater risk of making mistakes, mistakes that can result in patient harm,” Agius said.

Helen Salisbury, a GP in Oxford and columnist for *The BMJ*, said the removal would cause staff to think twice about self-isolating when they have symptoms and encourage spread in the workplace as well as putting those who have long covid in a difficult position.

She added, “Some are going to fall foul of the maximum number of paid sick days a year because at the moment people are getting covid four times a year. It’s incredibly unfair because a lot of them catch it at work.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said, “As we learn to live with covid, we are withdrawing the temporary NHS staff sickness guidance that was put in place at the height of the pandemic, as part of plans to move back to the normal arrangements set out in the NHS terms and conditions. “This provides generous support for NHS staff with up to six months full pay and six months half pay, depending on length of service.”

¹ Wise J. Covid-19: Sharp rise in infections seen across the UK. *BMJ* 2022;378:doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1638.

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