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Monday, 11 May 2020

Dear Employer,

Your employee has contacted us to seek clarification of the steps they should take to protect themselves from Covid-19. This letter is a generic response to that request and has been downloaded from our website (the original can be found at:- www.forestsidemedicalpractice.co.uk)

The NHS has contacted those patients who are at extremely high risk already but this initial contact was only for those with a small number of specific conditions. The initial guidance asked GP surgeries to contact other patients who they determined should also be placed into this category. Unfortunately the guidance for this activity has not yet been received and this has left a large number of patients concerned about whether they should be shielding, social distancing, self-isolating and unclear about their level of risk. Along with risks relating to long term conditions, there are also risks for patients who are pregnant.

We are not currently able to say with certainty if your employee should be placed into one of these categories. We realise this leaves your employee and yourself as an employer in a difficult position, but unfortunately we have specifically been instructed not to create additional lists or generate additional letters at the moment.

Clearly those with underlying conditions are at higher risk of complications from Covid-19 and employers should be following the guidance in the link below, and where possible enabling staff to work from home or if in the workplace ensuring that social distancing can be practiced.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>

We are aware of the levels of anxiety our patients with long term conditions or pregnancy have and we encourage our patients to talk with their employers to try to agree a safe working plan during these difficult times. We are also cognisant of the extreme pressure employers and businesses are under.

One of the issues GP surgeries have faced in further identification of patients at risk is the complexity of searching our clinical systems and the need for very specific parameters to have been developed in order to define the searches.

It is unlikely for example that we will be able to define 'severe COPD' from a data perspective, similarly defining the data for moderate or severe asthma will be equally difficult without a single agreed approach at national level. We are therefore concerned that the clarity being sought by patients and their employers may be some way off. We are sorry that expectations of the ability of GP surgeries to identify patients were raised and would like to assure you that we are working closely with other organisations on this issue and that the problematic nature of this work has been raised at a national level.

We would therefore ask that employers and employees discuss a way forward which both parties can agree on utilising the guidance available (which is being updated all the time).

Further guidance can be found here:-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19>

As employers ourselves, we have sought to minimise or stop contact with the public for staff members with underlying conditions which put them at higher risk, redeploying them to back office roles, or arranging them to work from home where possible. We have referred to our own Occupational Health service where needed.

For these reasons, we are unable to comment specifically on the nature or type of work your employees could safely undertake. We hope that the links below help you to make this decision in the meantime.

Asthma UK <https://www.asthma.org.uk/advice/triggers/coronavirus-covid-19/>

British Heart Foundation <https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/heart-matters-magazine/news/coronavirus-and-your-health>

British Lung Foundation <https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/coronavirus>

British Society for Rheumatology <https://www.rheumatology.org.uk/news-policy/details/covid19-coronavirus-update-members>

Diabetes UK https://www.diabetes.org.uk/about_us/news/coronavirus

Pregnancy (Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists) <https://www.rcog.org.uk/en/guidelines-research-services/guidelines/coronavirus-pregnancy/covid-19-virus-infection-and-pregnancy/>

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We are therefore concerned that the clarity being sought by patients and their employers may be some way off, or indeed may prove unachievable. We are sorry that expectations of the ability of GP surgeries to identify patients were raised and would like to assure you that we are working closely with other practices on this issue and that the problematic nature of this work has been raised at a national level.

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Yours faithfully
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