

Translation of summary found on the Internet at: www.cancer.dk/arbejde

In Denmark, cancer strikes over 13 000 [*sic*] people of working age every year. At the workplace, this may lead to uncertainty and a range of problems. As a manager, what should you do when one of your colleagues is seriously ill? What should be discussed? And how, in general terms, can you support the person who is ill? Those who work with him may also find they have problems, feeling nervous and unsure as to how they should behave when with their sick colleague. Problems arise for both the business and for the sick person.

- Common reactions when a life-threatening illness occurs
- Contact with the worker while he is ill
- When he wants to start work again
- The colleagues of a worker who has cancer

- Check list: what can you do?
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Common reactions when a life-threatening illness occurs

When they learn they have a potentially fatal illness such as cancer, most people cannot take it in. It seems unreal, especially if they have not been feeling particularly unwell. Most are shocked, some break down and cannot think clearly at all while others believe the doctors must have made a mistake. Others immediately think: why me?

In the early days, especially, people feel shocked and cannot cope with their new situation. At this time it can be difficult to concentrate and do one's normal work in the business, or to deal with colleagues and other people.

Many don't have the strength to go to work but report sick after receiving the diagnosis, regardless of whether their treatment is due to begin immediately or some weeks later. Most will appreciate some small token from their firm, a bunch of flowers, for example.

But not everyone takes sick leave on being diagnosed with cancer. Some decide to continue work to some extent after a short time. There may be various reasons for choosing to work: it may be a way of putting some kind of order into an otherwise chaotic daily life. It may be that the sick person wants something to be "the same as it always has been" when their lives have been turned upside down. Or the workplace may be a much-needed cancer-free zone, where the sick person can push the cancer out of his mind.

When the first shock is over and patients realise that they really do have a life-threatening illness, it is normal for them to alternate between being depressed and hoping it is not as bad as all that. It is also common for them to feel extremely worried at times that they

will die of the illness, or for the situation to appear totally bewildering.

Most cancer patients are offered some form of treatment, most commonly an operation, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or hormone therapy. In the time leading up to the start of treatment, the waiting and uncertainty may be difficult, putting a serious psychological strain on patients. In addition, they don't know how their bodies will react to the proposed treatment.

A further typical reaction is for a patient to worry about how long the illness will last, whether he will lose his job, how employers and colleagues will react. Some worry that they risk losing their jobs because they take too much sick leave, and for this reason they may try – as far as possible – to continue working whilst having treatment.

Contact during the illness

It is important for the business to suggest an early interview with an employee who has cancer. Around eight weeks after the diagnosis would be appropriate.

There may be a risk that contact will be lost between an absent employee who is seriously ill and his place of work. Maybe he doesn't have the energy to take the initiative himself and contact the workplace, whereas there may be concern in the business that any approach will be construed as an infringement of his right to peace and quiet in his private life.

In our experience, it is important for the manager or head of human resources to offer to talk early on with an employee who has a potentially fatal illness. As a rule, however, it will be a good idea to wait until he has got over the first shock, which tends to happen around six to eight weeks after diagnosis. At this time, too, the employee knows more about treatment plans – or maybe treatment has already begun. But when it is best to talk to the employee varies from one person to another, and we therefore recommend that the employee is asked to suggest a date.

It can be made clear to the employee that he may take a third person such as a close colleague, a union official or perhaps his wife.

It may be difficult for a manager to talk to an employee who has been told he has a life-threatening illness. Many managers will have personal experience of cancer in their own family, for example, or among friends and acquaintances. This experience may to some extent dictate how the conversation is conducted. Managers must be aware that different cancers run different courses, and that two people with the same diagnosis may also find the course of the disease varies. Managers may also be nervous of the sick person's reactions – afraid that he may start to cry, for example. But this should not prevent an interview: the employee is already upset about his illness and it is not the talk as such that is making him unhappy. There may also be things managers want to ask about, but they are afraid of overstepping the mark. If they have such questions, they can always say that

the employee should answer only if he wants to.

It is a good idea to draw up an agenda before the meeting, if only to give the employee a chance to prepare for it. It may be crucial to discuss the following points at an early meeting:

Information on the illness and treatment

The employee must have an opportunity to brief the manager on his illness and any planned treatment, including saying how long the treatment is expected to last. He may already know whether the illness and treatment are likely to affect resumption of work. Does the employee need to be on sick leave for the short or the longer term? Ask how the employee is doing.

Drafting the business's staff policy in connection with a life-threatening illness

If the business does not already have a staff policy covering this area, it is important to let the employee know what its position is as regards sick leave, including any possibility that a worker with a life-threatening illness may be dismissed. What opportunities are there for suggesting shorter working hours, home working, flexible working hours etc.?

Contact with the workplace

If the employee wishes to work while sick and is able to do so, it is important to discuss whether he is able satisfactorily to continue with the job he has been doing. If he needs to go on sick leave, how can contact with his workplace best be maintained?

Informing colleagues

What information should be passed on to colleagues? How frank does the employee wish to be about his illness? How should the information be passed on? Should a union official or a close colleague act as contact person? Does the employee concerned want his workplace to be a "cancer-free zone", where he can, as far as possible, "switch off" from his illness and where there is little talk of illness among his colleagues? Or does the sick person feel at ease talking about life-threatening illness and about how he feels? Those cancer patients who choose to be open about their illness almost always find this a great boon, both for themselves and for those around them. If lack of secrecy is part of the works culture, the sick colleague can be urged to be open, but his wishes should be respected if he does not want this.

Sorting out financial affairs

Does the employee continue on full pay while on sick leave? Information should be available on any possible financial help from pension companies in the case of serious illness. It may also be useful to involve the local authority experts who may, among other things, provide information on financial and social possibilities for those who are sick.

A date may be agreed for a further meeting

If the treatment and sick leave look like being long-term, it may be an advantage for both parties for the manager and the sick employee to have one or more meetings in the meantime, so that the employee can say how things are going. Such meetings may be quite short and take place, for instance, when the person concerned is in any case visiting his workplace.

It is generally a good idea for those at the workplace to take the initiative and keep in regular contact during the period of sick leave. A sick employee may, for instance, be invited to come and visit for coffee with his colleagues now and then. Or a close colleague may ring him at home to find out how he is. This friend may then discuss with the sick person what information their other colleagues should be given. This information may be passed round by e-mail, for example. If contact has been maintained between the sick person and the workplace during the period of illness, the return to work will generally be much easier for the both sides.

When the colleagues wishes to go back to work

When someone has been off sick for a long time, it may be that he cannot imagine going back to work again. He has often changed mentally and, perhaps, physically. In addition many cancer patients may suffer after-effects of the illness and the treatment, tiredness being the most common.

It is generally very useful for the sick employee and his manager to have a meeting before he goes back to work, where both parties can agree on what they expect to happen.

It will be a good idea for the talk to cover such subjects as:

1. How much work the person can be expected to put in in the short and longer term;
2. Whether it is possible to start off by working part-time and gradually work up to normal hours. Note that the local authority can provide information on whether it is possible to get an extra daily sickness allowance;

3. The sick person's financial circumstances;
4. Whether there are any particularly difficult jobs which can be shared out among other workers for a time;
5. How the parties concerned wish the person's immediate colleagues to be given information;
6. The time for a further meeting, such as a few weeks later, to see whether it is necessary to make any changes in what has been agreed.

Note that many cancer patients are keen to return to work full-time as soon as possible after treatment is over. It may be that they have a guilty conscience at having been on sick leave for so long and at having colleagues do their work for them. Or it may be important for those who have been on sick leave to start work again full-time to show – both to themselves and to others – that they are now completely well again. Unfortunately, full-time work is often too much to start with. It has generally been our experience that most of those who have been off work for a long time owing to cancer can best resume work if they start part-time and work up gradually to full time as their strength returns.

The colleagues of a worker with cancer

When an employee has cancer, his illness will in most cases affect his colleagues in the workplace. They may react in various ways, most commonly by being concerned and feeling sorry for him. It is also not uncommon for them to be worried that they themselves may get cancer. If the illness lasts a long time some may also be annoyed that they have extra work to do during the patient's absence and this annoyance may lead to a bad conscience about negative feelings when a colleague is seriously ill.

If there are clear signs that colleagues are under emotional strain, it may be a good idea to get the group together and discuss their reactions to their colleague's illness. They may be asked to describe briefly how they have been affected, and if any of them can suggest how the problems might be tackled: should they be encouraged to talk now and again about how they feel or should they let well alone? Is there anything they wish to do for the sick colleague, and what is the best way of doing it?

More often than not, a sick person's immediate colleagues are uncertain as to how they can best show their support, both while he is off sick and when he returns to work.

As a general rule, it will be useful to ask the sick worker what he needs from his colleagues. Some will perhaps welcome visits while they are off work and others not. Some would like their colleagues to behave as they always have done when they return to work and others appreciate special concern. Note that a sick person's needs usually change over time.

Check list: what can you organise?

Most people will appreciate a small token such as a bunch of flowers from their workplace when they report sick after being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

It is important for the manager or head of human resources to offer the sick person a meeting in the early stages. A suitable time would be around eight weeks after diagnosis.

Draw up an agenda before the meeting so that the sick person can prepare for it. The following points are essential:

1. Information about the illness and treatment;
2. The business's attitude and policy as regards potentially fatal illnesses among its workers;
3. How colleagues should be informed and how much they should be told;
4. Clarification of the person's financial situation while on sick leave;
5. An agreement as to what contact there should be during his absence from work.

It may be a good idea to ask the sick person to come into work to visit while he is off sick.

It is generally a great advantage for the employee and for the manager to have a meeting before the return to work, so that both parties can clarify their expectations.

When the employee goes back to work, he may be urged to start part-time and gradually increase his working hours.

Be aware that the situation may be difficult for colleagues. If there are clear signs that the sick person's immediate colleagues are stressed by the situation, it may be a good idea to get the group together to discuss how they are reacting to their colleague's illness.

If colleagues are not sure how they should help the person who is sick both while he is away and when he resumes work, they can be urged to ask the person concerned what he needs.

Long-term strategy: Draw up a staff policy for life-threatening illnesses.

Staff policy

Some heads of human resources think that a staff policy on life-threatening illnesses may make it difficult to treat those who are seriously ill as individuals. However, it is the experience of *Kræftens Bekæmpelse* that an official policy may ensure that the business discusses various important problems and decides on its approach. But this does not exclude individual solutions for individual problems.

A survey has shown that some heads of human resources do not want a fixed policy in this field since such a policy may make it difficult to show the individual concern which

such situations often require. We in *Kræftens Bekæmpelse* ["*Fighting Cancer*"] are unanimous that a life-threatening illness demands individual attention, but in our experience it is both possible and beneficial to have an official, written policy giving guidelines for how the situation should be tackled. Such a policy may state, for example, that contact should be established with a seriously ill employee " by agreement with the manager and the sick person" , wording which gives a great deal of scope for action to be tailored to the individual situation. But at the same time the written guidelines ensure that both parties discuss how contact shall be set up and maintained.

In some of those businesses which already have a staff policy in this field, the heads of human resources say that it consists largely of a few general indications as to how the business should react when an employee has a life-threatening illness.

The fact that an "illness policy" is not laid down in detail and with specific indications as to what should be done may cause problems when an employee becomes seriously ill.

There are several advantages in having a specific policy in this area:

1. Decisions which have been properly weighed up and state how matters can be tackled will generally lead to a better way of going about things – better for both sick staff and management.
2. Managers feel less insecure if they have good working tools when they are suddenly confronted with a situation which may be difficult to handle.
3. Employees who are sick feel less insecure if the firm has laid down a policy on its attitude to and procedures in the case of serious illness.
4. All employees find it reassuring to a greater or lesser extent that the workplace has a policy in this field with which they can become familiar.
5. This sends out a clear signal that the business takes its social responsibilities seriously. It makes for goodwill and makes it more likely that the business can stand by the employee.

Kræftens Bekæmpelse recommends that both private and public workplaces have a staff policy on life-threatening illness.

Such a policy will usually be drafted jointly by management and union officials at the workplace, and the HSU, the *hovedsamarbejdsudvalget* [Central Liaison Committee], is normally a natural forum for discussions and drafting. If one or more employees wish to expand an existing staff policy to include a chapter on life-threatening illness, this request will usually be directed to the HSU.

Since businesses will have various requirements and priorities for this kind of policy, we cannot produce any firm guidelines for the content. The various norms and cultures which prevail in workplaces mean that there may also be many different editions of an illness policy in this field.

Below, we give a few examples of situations on which it will generally be advantages to produce a ruling when the policy is drafted:

1. Will the employee in question be offered a meeting with the manager or head of human resources early on in his illness?
2. How should sympathy for the employee's difficult situation be expressed?
3. When and how should colleagues be informed?
4. Is it desirable for the employee to be encouraged to have contact with the workplace during any sick leave? What initiatives should the business take in such a case?
5. Does the workplace want a certificate showing how long the illness is likely to last, and if so when?
6. Is it desirable to have rules on giving notice to an employee with a life-threatening illness, and if so, when?
7. What is the workplace's attitude to a reorganisation of jobs, a reduction in working hours or part-time sick leave, to allow for home working or a possible transfer within the business?
8. Is it desirable to have a meeting with the sick person before he returns to work, so that both sides can decide on what work input they can expect?

It is always possible for difficult and stressful situations to arise when a colleague is struck down by a potentially fatal illness such as cancer. We hope that the outline presented here can act as "first aid" for someone suddenly confronted by problems relating to a sick person or his colleagues.

Kræftens Bekæmpelse has published a handbook entitled "*Når en medarbejder får kræft*" ["When a colleague has cancer"], which is both more detailed and more extensive than the outline presented here. The handbook is intended as a work of reference for various practical problems which may arise when an employee has cancer. It includes more information on the various points and additional points such as how one can deal with the situation when the sick person is unable to return to work, or when the illness proves fatal.

The book is designed to be used as a tool by businesses wishing to draft a staff policy on life-threatening illness, i.e. a policy with specific indications as to how the situation may be handled when an employee develops a potentially fatal illness such as cancer.

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- Front page: www.cancer.dk

Translation of the first few pages of the complete text



When a colleague develops cancer

One in seven Danes develops cancer before reaching pensionable age

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Foreword

A colleague has cancer: it may happen in any business. Every year over 11 000 [sic] Danes of working age develop cancer. Nowadays, many are cured and many live a long time with their illness.

Over the past few years, *Kræftens Bekæmpelse* ["*Fighting Cancer*"] has received an increasing number of enquiries from managers, colleagues and cancer patients experiencing problems at work during or after the illness. These enquiries show a great deal of uncertainty about how the problems can best be tackled.

A few typical examples would be that managers and colleagues take too little account of the situation of the person who is sick, or that, on the other hand, they worry too much about it, so that the sick person is isolated both at work and socially. Another problem may be the difficulty of making the necessary changes in the work the colleague has to do while suffering from the illness, or that a long absence from work or, perhaps, a period when the person concerned is not able to do as much work as usual after treatment, means that he may lose contact with the labour market.

With these points in mind, *Kræftens Bekæmpelse* has carried out *Projekt Kræft og Arbejde* ["*Cancer and Work Project*"] with financial support from the Social Affairs Ministry. The project has resulted in practical solutions to problems of dealing with workers who have cancer, taking into account both the individual resources of the cancer patient and the working conditions of the business in question.

One of the aims has been to improve the employers' knowledge of cancer and of the special situation of cancer patients in order to reduce the risk of their exclusion from the labour market.

This handbook is based on our experience with this project, and has been written for managers and others with responsibility for human resources in workplaces in Denmark. We hope the book will be useful for managers, colleagues and workers who are seriously ill, in both small and large businesses.

Anne Nissen
Head of Department

Introduction

A diagnosis of cancer does not affect the person concerned alone: it also affects those with whom he comes into contact. At work, managers and colleagues are often shaken by the news. They would like to help and "do the right thing", but many are not sure what the "right thing" is, exactly.

At the same time, managers may well have to make quick decisions – about how the person can be relieved of some of his work while he is ill, for example. It may be difficult to consider the needs of the sick employee as well as solving urgent practical problems at a time when there are many imponderables.

This handbook has been written for managers and others with responsibility. It includes both background information and practical suggestions as to how to deal with various problems involving workers who have cancer or another serious illness.

You do not have to read the whole book

The book is intended as a reference work, to be used by those who are suddenly confronted with a specific problem arising from a colleague's serious illness. But readers will, of course, have a better basis for dealing with the situation if they read the whole text.

The background to what we have written

Our inspiration came from two sources: firstly enquiries from both managers and cancer patients about problems in the workplace arising from the illness and the second a survey which *Kræftens Bekæmpelse* carried among human resources managers in 50 large businesses. They were asked, for example, what in particular led to problems at the workplace when a colleague developed cancer.

The two sources mentioned the same problems, and it is these which are tackled in Chapters 1-6.

The seven chapters

Chapter 1 deals with the immediate aftermath of a cancer diagnosis. Many patients find themselves in a state of shock for 6 to 8 weeks. All those who have a life-threatening illness such as cancer will react in their own fashion, but it is nevertheless possible to describe how they may react when they learn they have the disease and what their needs are in that early period. The chapter also contains a section with general information on cancer and treatment methods.

Chapter 2 then deals with the period when treatment has begun. Many cancer patients wish to live as normal a life as possible during this period, and some would like to work in between treatments, whereas others will not be able to do so. We describe what businesses can do in both situations.

Chapter 3 deals especially with those problems which may arise when a sick person has to resume the work he did before his illness.

Chapter 4 discusses possible ways of seeking financial and practical support for the business or for the sick colleague. Some arrangements come into play if the person concerned is still receiving treatment and others apply if it turns out after treatment has finished that the person has problems carrying out the work he did previously.

Chapter 5 describes how a colleague who is not able to work again may leave work, and shows what can be done if the cancer proves fatal.

Chapter 6 deals with the sick employee's colleagues. Those he works with are often affected by his illness, and this chapter includes suggestions as to what the manager can do if colleagues' reactions become a problem in the department. It also contains some pages which can be copied and handed out to the sick worker's colleagues.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, suggests how a business may forestall many of the problems which may arise in connection with the serious illness of an employee by introducing a staff policy on serious illness. Three cases are then discussed, i.e. examples of stages through which the disease may pass, cases which may be used when working on such a policy.

Further points to note

The book invariably refers to the sick person in the masculine form. This does not mean that cancer affects only male workers: in fact, almost as many women as men develop cancer. But from the language point of view it is clumsy to write " he or she" every time a worker with a life-threatening illness is referred to in the text;

For a quick look at the content of the book, go to the website www.cancer.dk/arbejde, which gives both an abridged and the full version of the book.

Cancer patients, too, can use the suggestions in the book for inspiration or for practical help when they are trying to solve problems at the workplace.

Even though the book starts off by discussing what can be done when a colleague has cancer, the content will also be relevant to other life-threatening illnesses.