Working conditions and sickness absence: a complex relation

EDITOR,—A recent article1 in this journal has commented on the part played by working conditions, especially psychosocial risk factors, in causing sickness absence, and two editorialists have encouraged the need for research calling for action to improve the work environment and to assess its impact upon sickness absence. 2

While we entirely agree with these views, the paths through which working conditions will lead to sickness absence are not clear. Sickness absence episodes are often medically certified as attributable to "common diseases"; that is, not work related diseases. In fact, diseases found in a number of studies between 83% of patients of a primary medical centre declared that their diseases were not work related diseases. 3

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In Spain, for example, we found that approximately three of four sickness absence episodes were medically certified as attributable to common diseases. 4 This issue is important because it might partly explain the associations found in a number of studies between working conditions and sickness absence. 5

If so, the impact of workplace preventive measures on sickness absence would seem to be lower than expected. Alternatively, it could be that many sickness absence episodes medically certified as common diseases were attributable to work related diseases. Newman, however, found that 85% of patients of a primary medical centre declared that their diseases were not related to working conditions. 6 Similarly, we found that around 85% of sickness absences certified as common diseases were assessed by two experts as probably not work related diseases. 7 A different approach would be that working conditions operate through two different ways to produce sickness absence either attributable to common diseases or work related diseases.

To further study sickness absence as an appropriate indicator of workplace prevention we propose to test a simplified theoretical model of the natural history of sickness absence (see fig 1) where working conditions are associated to sickness absence following two different pathways: (1) the development of work related disease (including work injuries), which would lead to sickness absence, and (2) the development of common diseases that, after interacting with working conditions, would lead to sickness absence. For instance, a worker with a minor respiratory disease may ask their general practitioner to certify sickness leave for physical and psycho-social work requirements aggravate their health problem. We have to keep in mind that a sick leave provides an opportunity for recuperation after illness because sickness absence is also a coping strategy to prevent more serious ill health. 8

According to a recent report, the majority of European Union countries show a separate regulation of the two types of sickness absence in the social security systems (that is, certified needed, waiting days, level of benefits, maximum duration, etc). 9 However, at the firm level both types of sickness absence are frequently accounted together because of management reasons. So far, no research has assessed the associations between working conditions and sickness absence distinguishing between sickness absences attributable to work related diseases and those attributable to common diseases.

Furthermore, working conditions interact with other social and personal factors in the causality of sickness absence episodes. Sickness absence could actually be more an indicator of functioning rather than a pure illness absence could actually be more an indicator of functioning rather than a pure illness absence (see fig 1) where working conditions may not only be hypothesised to contribute to infections, musculoskeletal problems, and behaviour involving risk to health. 10

Through such mechanisms, poor psychosocial work environment may be hypothesised to contribute to infections, musculoskeletal problems, and increased ambulatory blood pressure and increased progression of atherosclerosis. 11

Taken together, the evidence available is compatible with the hypothesis that improvement of working conditions may not only reduce the consequences of morbidity (for example, sickness absence) but also the risk of morbidity.

3. Ronda E, Alvarez-Dardet C. Work and health: a reproductive working demands and we probably will be able to understand more of its significance if we take into account both productive and reproductive working demands along with other social and personal factors in the causality of sickness absence episodes. Sickness absence could actually be more an indicator of functioning rather than a pure illness absence. 8
