Entitled to sick leave?

A brief guide for veterinary employees

IF you are unable to work due to sickness, your employer is probably obliged to pay you statutory sick pay. As an employee, it does not matter how long you have been employed by your employer, unless you have a fixed-term contract for three months or less, in which case you will not qualify for statutory sick pay.

To determine your eligibility, you must be employed under a contract of service, and you are entitled to benefits if you meet the following requirements:

- You are between the ages of 16 and 65;
- You are sick for at least four consecutive days including weekends and holidays; and
- You are earning an average of at least £95 per week.

You are ineligible for these benefits if you meet the following criteria:

- You are taking part in trade union action;
- You are in legal custody; or
- You have been receiving incapacity benefits for eight weeks prior to your illness.

You will receive benefits for every day you would normally have been working. Benefits begin on the fourth day of illness and last for no longer than 28 weeks. If you become ill again, you may claim statutory sick pay from the first day of illness. The amount of statutory sick pay is reviewed from time to time by the Government.

Some employers have their own sick pay schemes, which may be more generous than the statutory scheme; you will have to ensure you follow their rules, which may include providing a doctor’s certificate stating that you are unfit to work. These rules may be different from the statutory sick pay regulations. Your contract of employment should state the terms and conditions relating to sickness and sick pay, namely whether contractual sick pay is payable and for how long it is payable, the amount payable and whether the amount calculated includes statutory sick pay.

Do I have to make up on-call duty from when I was sick?

There is no legal requirement for an employer to make up on-call duty if they were sick when rostered for this duty. However, in most instances it would mean that another employee or a practice principal covered your stint of on-call duty. Therefore, it would be a professional courtesy to offer to cover that person’s next rostered on-call duty.

What if I am sick because of work?

Employers are required by law to carry an employer’s liability insurance policy that covers their workers in the event they suffer a work-related injury or illness. The certificate of this policy must be displayed in your place of work.

These policies ensure that injured and/or ill workers receive financial compensation for lost wages, medical expenses and permanent incapacity, if the sickness is work related. It is important that if you suffer a work-related injury or illness you inform your employer as soon as possible and provide the appropriate medical certificates.

This article is based on advice given in the 'BVA new graduate guide’, a handbook provided to final-year students and graduates up to eight years’ qualified on joining the BVA. For more information visit www.bva.co.uk/youngvetnetwork
Ten-minute chat

Christine Shield is a non-executive clinical director for Companion Care, a part-time role which she performs alongside other freelance and locum work within the profession. After graduating from the Edinburgh vet school in 1983, she opened her own single-handed small animal practice in 1987, selling it as a going concern in 2004. She is a past-president of the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) and sits on the councils of the BVA and the RCVS.

What made you decide to join Companion Care?
I knew very little about the company or about what the job would entail, but thought it might be interesting to find out more. I was initially rather sceptical of ‘corporates’, but this was an opinion formed in ignorance, and I soon learned that this is an ethical company, which strives for high standards. After several months of interviews and fact-finding, much to my surprise, I was offered the job. That was two years ago.

How did you get to where you are today?
Entirely by accident! My ambition was always to be a small animal practitioner, but after 17 years in single-handed practice, I was disillusioned by the multiplying burden of legislation, and working all hours for a poor return. My involvement in veterinary politics had got me used to wider horizons, but was a hobby that was increasingly difficult to fund.

Companion Care is only a small part of my overall workload, although it is probably the most rewarding part. I also run the office for the British Veterinary Hospitals Association, I write for the veterinary press and do locum work. None of these was planned; I simply adopted a policy of never turning down any job. That was two years ago.

How do you spend a typical day?
I don’t have a typical day, which is one of the things that I like about this lifestyle. One day I might have a long operating list as a locum in a neutering clinic, the next I might be at a Companion Care board meeting with a bunch of high-powered financiers. After that I might be organising a conference or sitting on an RCVS disciplinary hearing. On the rare day when I don’t have anything specific, you’ll find me in my home office catching up on paperwork, but now and again I sneak off for a day’s birdwatching.

What do you like about your job?
It’s the variety that I enjoy. I have the freedom to schedule days off and enjoy a little more leisure but, while that works fine in theory, my work ethic makes it hard for me to turn down a day’s work. I compensate by taking more holidays than I could when I was in practice (mostly birdwatching in exotic locations), though I tend to keep them short as I don’t want any of my employers to discover that I’m not indispensable! As far as Companion Care is concerned, I enjoy working in a company where everything is done professionally and with a great team of enthusiastic and talented people. I feel that my input is valued and that I make a difference.

What do you not like?
Probably the lack of financial security. Working freelance, I am no-one’s employee and can easily be dispensed with at short notice. While I stick firmly to a policy of not becoming reliant on one employer, if I lost two regular employers at one time I could end up in difficulty. On the other hand, with no mortgage and no dependants I need very little income to live comfortably. Regarding Companion Care, the travelling can be a bit of a chore as I live in Northumberland and much of the work is in the south-east, but I enjoy driving and with Radio 4 for company the journeys pass easily enough.

Why is your job important?
In my opinion, and I must admit to being biased, it is extremely important for a company like Companion Care to have a veterinary surgeon on the board. The RCVS asks that veterinary businesses predominantly managed by non-veterinary surgeons should appoint a chief veterinary surgeon to take overall responsibility for professional matters within the business. It is not realistic, in a business of this size, for that role to be fulfilled by a veterinary surgeon who is operating their own practice within the group, one among many. My contacts within the profession, together with first-hand knowledge of managing my own practice and working in others, allows me to keep abreast of what is going on within the profession, and to make sure that the company keeps up to speed. Being aware of what’s going on in the company, I can challenge anything that might clash with ethical or legal guidance.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
No job done is ever wasted, whether paid or voluntary. It all adds to your experience and to your contacts.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
Never turn down a job without having tried it, and keep a broad portfolio of work to maintain interest and avoid reliance on one source of income.

What was your proudest moment?
I think that has to be my presidency of SPVS, and the successful conference that came at the end of that year. I worked insanely hard, stretched myself way beyond my comfort zone and would not have missed it for the world. It was a tremendous privilege to lead such a vibrant and forward-thinking organisation, and to work with lovely, talented people.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
I have an appalling memory for faces, and have conversations with people who turn out to be somebody completely different from who I thought they were. I love name badges – if only people would think to wear them on their right lapel, rather than at waist height, to help numpties like me. Tattooed on their foreheads would be even better!
Ten-minute chat

Christine Shield

Veterinary Record 2010 166: ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.g6929

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/166/3/ii

Email alerting service

These include:
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Topic Collections

Articles on similar topics can be found in the following collections
Ten Minute chats (132)

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/