

Fitness For Duty – A Necessary Consideration

By Dennis McClain, MD, ABEM, ABIME, MROCC



Like most of you, I was confronted in February by the mess left over from the ice storm. Unfortunately, we live in a wooded area with many pine trees and the wintry mix left these scattered across our driveway like pickup sticks. What's a part-time farmer to do? I fired up the tractor and the chain saw and went to work.

Although I exercise regularly and stay in fairly good shape (or so I thought), after several hours on the job, I was barely able to move and left whining hopelessly to my wife about how my stamina isn't what it used to be. Years ago, my days off were generally spent building fences, cutting trees, and putting up hay. Now it hit me—I'm no longer fit for the job that I used to do for fun.

Fitness for duty (FFD) is a complex issue that confronts all businesses both large and small. It refers to the physical or mental readiness of an employee to perform the essential functions of the job. Over a period of time, that job may have morphed, or sadly, the employee may have morphed as well. Sometimes this can be a de-conditioning issue (like mine above) or there may be medical issues in play as well.

Our workforce is aging. According to the government's Administration on Aging, the percentage of our population over age 55 now accounts for almost 40% of the workforce. Over half of that group self reports at least one disability: arthritis, hypertension, heart disease, and orthopedic problems are most often mentioned. Tasks that an employee performed without difficulty years ago may now be unmanageable or impossible. This situation needs to be addressed with compassion, truthfulness, and a willingness to find a good solution for both the worker and the boss.

There are multiple situations which could indicate that a FFD evaluation is needed such as: changes in health condition and medications that are reported to the employer such as a heart problem or recent surgery; changes in performance over time such as not meeting work demands or making errors; changes in mental status such as angry outbursts, withdrawal, or conflicts with co-workers; or suspected substance abuse.

What is the appropriate action for an employer to take in one of the above circumstances? First, make sure your actions are consistent, nondiscriminatory, and in agreement with your policies and procedures. If you are uncertain about this, consider a discussion with your legal counsel before proceeding. Second, consult

with your occupational health provider who should advise you on the best course of evaluation.

A FFD evaluation by your occupational provider is usually performed in their clinic. They will take an appropriate history from both you and your employee to gain a complete understanding of the situation. A physical examination is usually part of this evaluation. Medical records may need to be obtained from other providers who have been involved in the care of this individual. Drug and alcohol screens may need to be collected.

In some situations, your occupational health provider may need to do a functional assessment of the job under consideration followed by a functional capacity evaluation of the individual to determine if there is a good fit. If not, functional shortcomings need to be determined. After all of the information has been evaluated, your provider should be able to make specific recommendations regarding the worker's ability to perform their job.

If the worker is determined not to be able to perform the essential functions, you may need to consider appropriate accommodations. Again, your provider should be able to assist you and make recommendations.

Fitness for duty determinations often make both the employer and the employee uncomfortable. However, to ignore the situation places both parties in a position that can affect safety, productivity, liability, morale, and the integrity of the workplace.