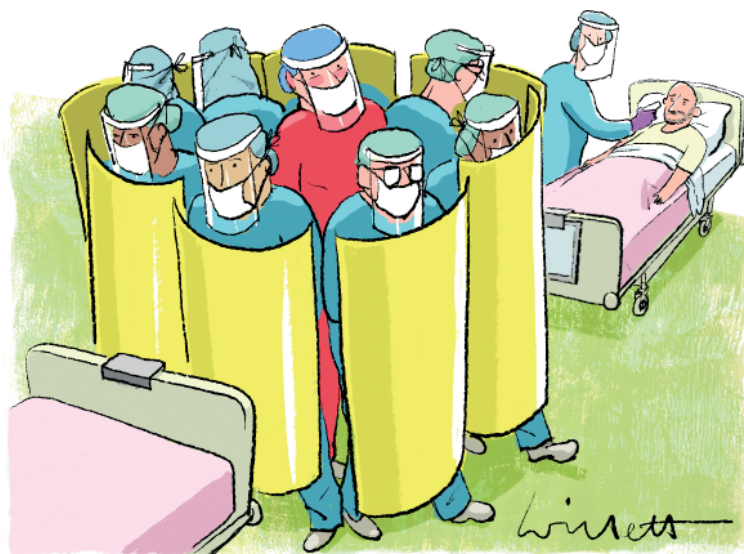


How can I help shielding trainees return to work?

Junior doctors who have been in strict isolation from covid-19 may now be able to come into the workplace. **Abi Rimmer** asks experts about how they can be best supported to adapt



Returning to work can be a psychological boost

Kamal Sidhu, GP

“Shielding trainees have been in a very difficult position. As well as worries around the health risks from covid-19, many may feel guilty for not being physically present during the pandemic. They’ll also worry about the impact on their training.

“Returning to work, however, can be a good psychological boost after a long period of isolation, so it’s vital to give these trainees the right support.

“The trainee’s formal occupational health assessment will be important, although there will need to be room for flexibility and negotiation. A fresh formal risk assessment should also be considered, and it may still be safer for your trainee to continue to work remotely. If they do return to the workplace then a brief reinduction and shadowing, as well as a refresh on using tools such as Microsoft Teams, would be time well spent.

“Remember that the trainee may initially feel more confident starting with remote consulting in a covid-19-secure part of the workplace.

“The importance of regular contact after each clinical session and debriefs must not be underestimated. This isn’t just an opportunity for the trainee to ask any burning questions but can be vital for informal support and any housekeeping.

“We mustn’t forget that this group will need exceptional support in these exceptional times and any undue risk must be avoided.”



Flexibility is key

Lucy Hanington, medicolegal consultant at Medical Protection Society

“Shielding trainees will likely be returning to an environment that is very different to the one they left. New technologies, referral pathways, and policies may be in place. Targeted induction programmes will help these trainees feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to practise safely.

“A focus on health and wellbeing will also be crucial. Teams may wish to consider how to provide colleagues with a warm welcome.

“Signposting appropriate sources of support will be important, and trainees will need to have access to regular risk assessments. The wider circumstances of each person will need consideration—financial worries, caring responsibilities, or bereavements may be additional sources of stress.

“Recent annual reviews of competence progression may have highlighted the impact shielding has had on training, leading to concern. Educational supervisors can help alleviate this concern by discussing training needs. Planning for how these can be met in uncertain times—including during further potential periods of shielding—may help to reduce anxiety and minimise the impact of covid-19 on career progression.

“Trainees and their colleagues will need to be flexible and adapt to circumstances as they change—a focus on individual needs is key.”



Be empathetic and creative

Radha Sundaram, consultant in intensive care at the Royal Alexandra Hospital, Paisley

“Encourage them to seek an occupational health appointment so that an individual risk assessment can be carried out, along with getting tailored advice on risk mitigation at work.

“Welcome them for an informal chat with their supervisor, either face-to-face or virtual, ahead of their first day at work. Confirm that they are fit tested for the personal protective equipment currently available at the hospital.

“Arrange shadowing shifts and a phased return. Recognise that along with their health vulnerabilities, these doctors will also have apprehensions around skill retention and team integration. Make sure that they have a mentor whom they could meet for informal chats to discuss their experience. It also helps to prepare the team that they are joining so that insensitive remarks about a prolonged break are not made.

“Ensure that the team adheres to social distancing rules. Having posters about face mask wearing and social distancing are good visual reminders for the others. Recognise that they cannot just resume routine duties—be perceptive and responsive to their views and needs.

“Our teams are not complete without these doctors—be empathetic and creative about maximising their training opportunities while protecting them.”

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