


Return to Activity

The Physician's Perspective

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A 39 Year Old Engineer Had a Back Strain...

- “Something is really wrong”
- “Can’t move because it causes pain”
- “My previous back pain caused me two years off work”
- “You mean I am going back to work tomorrow?!”
- “You mean I should move?” “Lying down makes me feel better, at least for a while”..

The Same Back Pain, Only This Time...

- He returned work after three days on modified duty
- Return to full duty after two weeks.
- Released after four weeks.
- “The doctor inspired me...” “I would not want to lose another two years of my life”.

A 52 Year Old EVS Worker...

- After shoulder surgery, stayed home for three months...
- When walked-in, surprised our staff with her obvious weight gain (about twenty pounds)
- Loss of workability- not able to return
- Work-hardening helped to restore to a functional level but with permanent restrictions- “You think I want to go back to that surgeon again?”

Why is Work Important?

- “No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality in the human community”
 - Sigmund Freud
- “Without work all life goes rotten”
 - Albert Camus

Iatrogenic Disability

- Off work 20 days, likelihood of ever returning to work is 70%
- Off work 40 days, the likelihood of ever returning to work is 50%
- Off work 70 days, the likelihood of ever returning to work is 35%
- *Johnson D, Fry T. Factors Affecting Return to Work after Injury: A study for the Victorian WorkCover Authority. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and social Research, 2002.*

Consequences of Being Away from Work

- Increased risk for delayed recovery
- Loss of financial security
- Loss of emotional and psychological support from co-workers
 - Depression, anxiety and other psychiatric sequelae
- Deconditioning and weight gain
- Family dysfunction

Being Away From Work Can Be Deadly

- Gerdtham and Johannesson described the mortality experience of 30,000 Swedes followed up for 10 to 17 years, concluding that unemployment increased the risk of death by nearly 50%.
- *Gresham UG, Johannesson M. A note on the effect of unemployment on mortality. J Health Econ. 2003;22:505-518*

Being Away From Work Can Be Deadly

- Unemployment has a significant negative impact on physical and mental health and results in increased mortality rates
- According to Waddell and Burton, unemployment causes, contributes to or accentuates negative health impacts
 - Increased rates of mortality due to CV disease and suicide
- *The Royal Australasian College of Physicians/The Australasian Faculty of Occupational & Environmental Medicine. Realizing the Health Benefits of Work: A Position Statement*

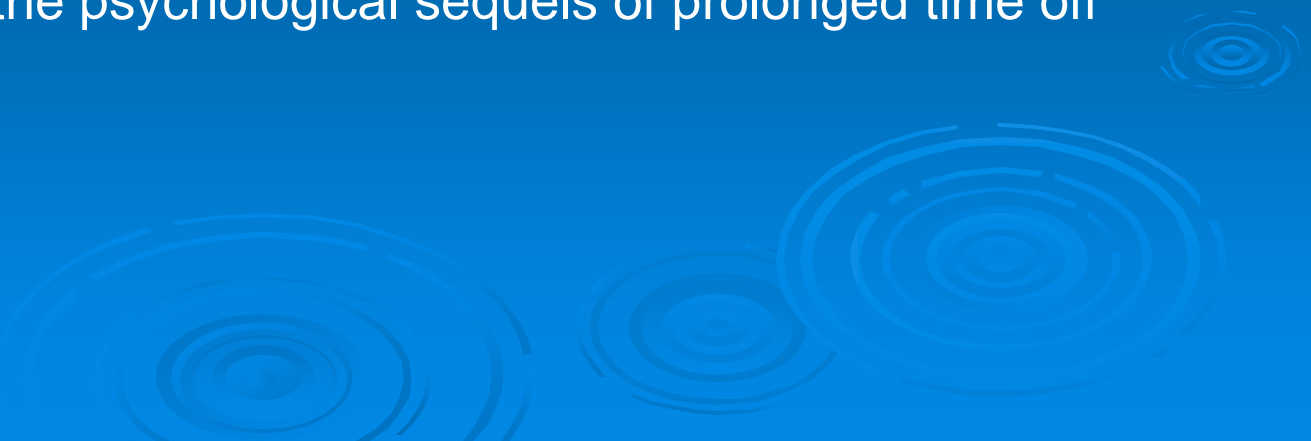
Being Away From Work is Bad for the Child's Health

- Waddell and Burton identified the influence that unemployment has to the children of those not working
 - A higher likelihood of chronic illnesses, psychosomatic symptoms and lower wellbeing for children in families where neither parent has worked in the previous 6 months
 - Children in whom parents are not working are more likely to be out of work themselves, either for periods of time or over their entire life
 - Psychological distress may occur in these children whose parents face economic challenges, which may result in withdrawal, anxiety and depression in the children as well as aggressive behavior and substance abuse
- *Waddell G, Burton AK. Is Work Good for Your Health and Well-being. United Kingdom Working for Health Document*

Importance of Staying Safely Active During Healing

American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons


“...support safe early return to work programs that help injured workers improve their performance, regain functionality, and enhance their quality of life....physicians realize that early return to work results in many benefits for the injured worker, including the prevention of de-conditioning and the psychological sequels of prolonged time off work....”



Importance of Staying Safely Active During Healing

ACOEM Guidance for Physicians:

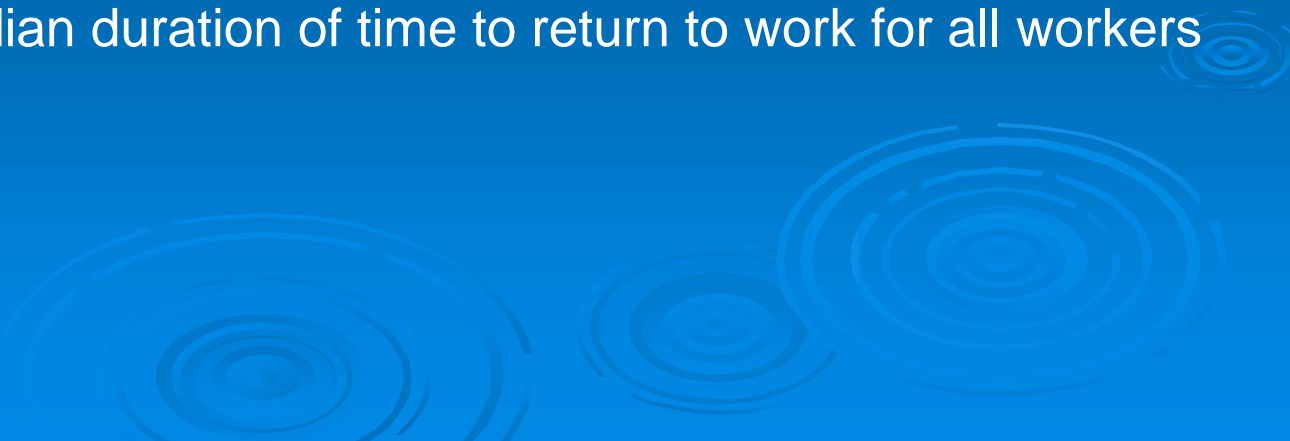
“The physician should encourage the patient to safely minimize life disruption due to illness or injury and to keep to an as normal as possible daily routine. For the employed patient, this includes finding a way to stay at work. If work is interrupted, elapsed time away from employment should be minimized....The exception to this general recommendation is any situation that would involve unavoidable serious medical or safety hazard to the patient, his or her coworkers, and/or society....”



Importance of Staying Safely Active During Healing

Rand Working Paper March 2010, *How Effective are Employer Return to Work Programs?*

“Reducing the recovery time for workers who are injured or disabled by a workplace accident is a key policy goal....Discrete-time hazard estimates suggest that the workers in a program return approximately 1.4 times sooner compared to workers injured at a firm without a program. This corresponds to a reduction of between 3-4 weeks in median duration of time to return to work for all workers in our sample.”



The Ubiquitous Dilemma

- How does one induce the reluctant employee back to work?
- Symptoms, by themselves, do not justify activity/work limitations, i.e. importance of “Tolerance”



Patient Education: It Starts at the First Visit



- Confirm patient understands the treatment plan
- Consider the patient's comments: Acknowledge and address patient's fears
- Set expectations for recovery and RTW **AT THE FIRST VISIT**
- Understand the nature of the job and engage the patient in the return-to-activity process. **Focus on physical activities rather than "work"**
- Be objective
- Doing what is right is not always the same as doing what will make the patient happy

Roadblocks to RTW

➤ Physician's Roadblocks

- I must make my patient happy
 - Doing whatever the patient wants
- I will try everything to make them feel better
 - Ignoring evidence-based medicine
- Administrative pressures driving clinical decisions

➤ Patient's Roadblocks

- Fear of
- Dislike of job, coworkers, manager
- Unaddressed psychological and social factors:
DON'T IGNORE THESE

Do Patients Understand How “Dangerous” Being Away From Work Can Be

- CTS surgery case
- Shoulder strain case



Closing Comments

- Focus on “activity” rather than “work”
- Focus on ability rather than solely on disability
- Help the injured worker understand the nature of their injury and/or illness
- Practice “evidence based medicine”
- Set clear expectations and stick to them!
- Engage patient
 - Have them identify what will improve their recovery
- Acknowledge, EARLY, potential negative outcomes if away from work
 - Vision for the future may be bleak

Closing Comments

- **DON'T IGNORE THE PSYCHOSOCIAL “YELLOW FLAGS”**
- **It is usually NOT the pathology that drives up the cost, it is the unrecognized and unaddressed psychosocial issues that account for the out of control costs**
- **Depending on your benefit system options, who ends up paying....?**

Finally...

➤ As stated by Gordon Waddell,

.... “...long term worklessness is one of the greatest risks to health in our society. It is more dangerous than the most dangerous jobs in the construction industry or working on an oil rig in the North Sea, and too often we not only fail to protect our patients from long term worklessness, we sometimes actually push them into it, inadvertently...”