

Title: THE RED FLAGS/GREEN LIGHTS GUIDE FOR CHALLENGING RETURN-TO-WORK SITUATIONS

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Suitable for one of these IFDN sessions:

- Identifying resources to Assist in the development and Promotion of Disability Management Programs for Employers (Applied Empirical or Institutional Studies)
- Opportunities and barriers to safe, early, and Sustainable return to Work (Applied Empirical or Institutional Studies)

Descriptive abstract

We discuss how we transformed the findings from a study of complex RTW problems into a guide for practitioners to make optimal decisions about the management of return to work.

Extended abstract

This presentation describes how findings from a study of complex RTW problems were transformed into a guide for practitioners to make optimal decisions about the management of return to work.

The research underlying the guide was prompted by studies showing that although workers' compensation claim rates have declined in recent years, across jurisdictions there has been a growing number of long-term workers' compensation claims. These claims are often multifaceted and complex and we have had a limited understanding of how they evolve. Our qualitative study of how and why workers with long-term claims have problems with return-to-work (RTW) found that the problem of long term claims crosses practice boundaries (between insurers, health care providers, employers) and that important situations and problems can

remain hidden from decision-makers because they sit at the juncture between different systems that are aimed at assisting workers. Therefore, decision-makers involved in workers' recovery and RTW are not always in a position to understand workers' complete situations and can make decisions that are not based on the full picture. We observed how such decisions contributed to delays and problems with workers' compensation claims.

The shift from academic research to a practice guide followed three steps, with editing and modifications at each stage. First, the researchers who conducted the study identified consistent RTW problems in the study data and called these 'red flags' that require decision-maker attention. They also drafted suggestions, or 'green lights' for how these problems might have been managed, and vignettes illustrating how actual RTW problems developed. Second, this early draft of the guide was reviewed by the injured workers and health care practitioners who had formed the Advisory Committee on the original study. These stakeholders who were familiar with the data were asked to validate the empirical basis of the 'red flags'. Third, workshops were conducted with a range of RTW experts across the province of Ontario in order to review the 'red flags', review and generate 'green light' suggestions for optimal practice, and form expert consensus on how to manage the RTW problems found in the study. The stakeholders were also asked about dissemination strategies and target audiences for this product. The workshop RTW experts were a regional mix (including urban and rural) of health care providers, workers' compensation staff, employer representatives, and worker representatives. Finally, an Advisory Committee provided guidance to the study team throughout the study about the goals and design of this project and the final content of the guide. This committee included a range of RTW decision-makers: workers' compensation representative, employer representative, worker representatives, and an occupational health physician.

The value of this guide is its grounding in rich qualitative data that were able to provide an understanding of the complex causal linkages between an injury and a long-term claim. Although many studies have observed the relationship between long-term claims and poor injured worker health outcomes, few have examined the actual trajectory from work injury to poor health and related it to ways that stakeholders can improve their own decision-making practices.

The guide entitled "Red Flags/Green Lights: A Guide to Identifying and Solving return-to-Work Problems" is a popular download on the Institute for Work & Health website. Downloaders include well-known corporations, insurance companies, and international users. It has been adopted as a guidance tool by Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and distributed to all of their long-term case managers.

Selected References

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