

Concurrent F: Australasian Approaches and Perspectives on Workplace Safety Promotion and Regulation

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HEALTH BENEFITS OF WORK

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Background Employers can contribute to a stronger economy by ensuring their people are not harmed at work.

Purpose Business leaders need to give high priority to prevention and early intervention. Leaders that embrace the health benefits of work are setting the right 'tone at the top' to tackle the challenges to a life in work.

Methods Strategic planning and leadership engagement that focus on the health benefits of work.

Outcome Getting work health and safety right delivers improved productivity, improves workforce participation and increases social inclusion.

Significance to the Field It adds public health as a dimension to the prevention levers in work health and safety.

The longer a period of absence from the workplace due to ill health, the less likely it becomes that a worker will ever return. After 20 days absence the likelihood of ultimate return is only 70%; after 70 days this declines to only 35%.¹ Unemployment is implicated in a range of psychological problems which in turn often has adverse consequences for physical health. The costs of the resulting social exclusion are high for both society and the individual.

Continuing in employment can impact outcomes positively, but an important qualifying factor is that the work must be meaningful—if not, pre-existing problems can be magnified. Work stressors can also be the cause of mental health problems, so finding suitable work for a person with mental health problems is often complex; they are therefore more likely to be out of work and for longer, which can lead to a self-fulfilling downward spiral.

Early intervention is acknowledged to be key to limiting this risk. Where there is no definitive need for absence from the

workplace and the appropriate accommodations can be made to permit continuing attendance or early return, this should be promoted as the accepted approach. This will require enhanced education for healthcare professionals, through professional leadership to encourage change in unhelpful beliefs about work and health. Employers can contribute by providing supportive workplaces, leadership and training and good case management. Evidence based policy support by government will underpin these changes, along with public education campaigns to raise awareness that work is good for people.

1. Johnson D, Fry T. *Factors affecting return to work after injury: a study for the victorian work cover authority*. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2002.