

ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF THE RETURN-TO-WORK PROCESS AMONG SICK-LISTED WORKERS WITH LOW BACK PAIN: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Aims:

Low back pain (LBP) is an important cause of work disability and sickness absence. An effective return-to-work (RTW) process is necessary to prevent LBP from becoming a chronic condition, and thereby leading to applications for disability benefits. In order to promote RTW, sufficiency of RTW efforts, i.e. all efforts (vocational and non-vocational) designed to increase the chance of RTW, is very important. However, the quality and effect of the RTW process is influenced by a large number of factors, which makes the operationalization of 'sufficient RTW efforts' and the assessment of the RTW process a unique challenge.

The main aim of this study was to identify which factors determine sufficiency of RTW efforts, by investigating arguments and underlying grounds relevant to the assessment of RTW efforts of sick-listed employees with low back pain.

Methods:

Two cases were selected which represent employees on sickness absence for two years due to low back pain. Each case was presented to Labour Experts (LE's) working at the Social Insurance Institute (SII) in the Netherlands. Data was gathered by means of a stepwise semi-structured approach in which professionals first received one of the cases. Using the case, each LE provided arguments for the decision on sufficiency of RTW efforts individually.

The LE's were then joined in a focus group meeting, during which underlying grounds for arguments were discussed. After this, factors were identified from the grounds by the researchers, and were grouped in themes to match the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)-model, to improve comparability and to provide a clear overview.

Results:

A total of fifteen professionals provided arguments relevant to the sufficiency of RTW efforts. After analysis of the arguments provided for the assessment of RTW efforts, three main themes emerged. The first theme includes factors such as level of (dis)ability and competencies (personal level), the second theme includes number of jobs available (external level), and one theme focuses on factors such as workplace interventions and guidance by employer (RTW interventions).

Conclusion:

The determinants of sufficiency of RTW efforts encompass the full width of the ICF-model. Determination of sufficiency of RTW efforts is essential to assess and improve the quality of the RTW process.

Further analyses of the relation between themes and the assessment of RTW efforts will be performed early 2010.

Keywords: Disability prevention, Return to work, Back, low back.

