

Work Injury and return to work in the context of work mobility: implications for families

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We know from the literature that:

RTW can adversely affect injured workers (Howse, 2017)

- deteriorating physical and mental health, chronic disability
- unemployment

And their families and home lives...

- financial hardship
- disrupted and damaged family and home lives

Mediating effect of work mobility?

Three studies

1. SSHRC-CIHR partnership development grant: **‘Policy and Practice in Return to Work’** (Cherry, Haynes, Lippel, Neis, MacEachen, Howse, Senthannar)
2. the **policy component of the On the Move Partnership** (Lippel)
3. CRWDP postdoctoral research: **‘Mobility to and within Work with a Physical Disability’** (Howse)

Disrupted routines due to changes in work scheduling

“I was supposed to go on the next, on my next shift with [boyfriend] and because of my injury I couldn’t go and so I stayed home and so we weren’t able to see each other for a month because after that we’re alternating shifts like his plane would fly out and my plane would fly in sort of thing” (Alice, ON, contract forestry, back injury)

Family impacts of RTW

Extended travel, time away from home

“[Case worker] would not let me come home for treatment. My case worker said: ‘He worked here, he got hurt here, he can get treated here.’ I flew back and forth for treatment 5 times before the surgery. After the surgery in Alberta my wife came to Calgary as a caregiver for 3 weeks, then I flew home.” (male, AB worker from AC, back injury)

“I would have liked to heal at home. My father died 3 months after. I could have spent the winter with him.” (male, AB worker from AC, knee injury)

*very different experiences with AB WCB

Financial hardship

“I got a local therapist and paid for it on my own...Going through my savings, feeling guilty. Paying for it myself. Taking it away from my family.” (male, AB worker in AC, head injury)

“I have, I have kids that come and see me on the weekends and stuff but, lately I don’t encourage them to come down because I can’t afford to feed them you know, and like I can’t afford to go get them.” (Jason, ON, temp, back injury)

Family impacts of RTW

Absence of family support during recovery

“Didn’t want to stay in a hotel alone. Wanted to be around family...Case manager was horrendous. Said we didn’t have the proper medical facilities [in Atlantic Canada]. They wouldn’t accept this. They wanted to deal with their doctors.”(male, AB worker from AC, head injury)

“And I was very much alone because I had moved from [home town] so my parents weren’t accessible, um, yes I had a circle of friends around, they helped me out a lot of course. But, you know, you’re in a new province, you’ve never been in before, you feel alone, isolated and, yeah it’s, you have to uh, you have to make ends meet, you have to cut back.” (female, NL, restaurant server, back injury)

Extensive travel for family

“My wife would take me to all my doctor’s appointments and, uh, like if I had to go to St. John’s for an appointment I would have to stay over night.”

“They sent me to St. John’s for five weeks to another program, they paid for it all, they put me in a hotel, my wife and I.” (male, NL, electrician, hip injury)

“It was Christmas and I was supposed to be home. My wife and son came down for Christmas. My employer paid for them.” (male, AB worker in AC, knee injury)

Compromised/damaged relationships

“I’m before the courts and the judge is saying, hey you’re not a responsible parent. And I’m saying well look at this file, where it says what they did to me “We’re terminating your claim because you have no injuries whatsoever.” Fourteen years later when I finally get my file it clearly states...right? So they took the evidence into court, to family court stating exactly what it says. I’m irresponsible, he said, as a father, but they ended up taking both of my children – my daughter and my son. I lost my family home, owned outright. Lost everything.” (male, NL, warehouse worker, back injury)

Legal and policy protections

Human rights legislation: family responsibility and relations are a prohibited grounds for discrimination

- Employers cannot impose mobility without accommodating ability to meet family and caregiving obligations
- Includes protection against modification in work shifts

Workers compensation legislation: Employer or WCB to find suitable employment for injured workers

- Can result in work mobility or requests to relocate

Labour standards legislation : no explicit provisions for mobility but considers whether mobility is implicit in the contract of employment

Conclusions

- Work mobility introduces unique RTW challenges for injured workers and their families.
- Need to better understand features of RTW process that do not work in context of work mobility.
- Importance of family recognized by legislation but not always in practice.

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