

Returning to Work Is Good Medicine



A Changing Approach to Return to Work

In the past physician's decisions about their patient returning to work (RTW) were often limited to either; the patient could return to full duty or they could not.

Today there's a new approach. Many employers are initiating "remain at work" and "RTW programs" for injured workers. The most progressive programs allow physicians to use the RTW process as part of their patient's treatment plan. In short, RTW becomes a form of therapy. The two can compliment each other in many cases.

Work as Therapy

RTW programs are based on the philosophy that many patients can safely do some form of productive work during their recovery. In order for this approach to be effective, it's vital that the patients understand and have confidence in the "work as therapy" philosophy. You can help by counselling your patients on the benefits and expected results of the RTW plan. It's important that they understand that a work as therapy approach can benefit them physically, emotionally and socially.

Benefits

The work as therapy approach benefits everyone.

- Workers benefit by recovering more rapidly and more completely.
- Employers benefit by being able to retain skilled workers.
- Physicians benefit by having access to a new therapeutic intervention – work as a therapy.

Attending Physician's Role

You are the one who sets the patient's expectations about time-loss. As an attending physician, you may be asked to facilitate the remain at work process to assist RTW planning. You may be asked to approve your patient's participation in proposed short-term, modified or alternative duties.

How to Facilitate the RTW Process

Communicate

Please help the patient (and his/her employer) understand when he/she can safely return to work, and under what conditions. When your patient cannot return to work, please explain to everyone involved why this is the case. It's also helpful to identify when (or if) you believe the patients condition will improve sufficiently to allow them to participate in a RTW program.

Use work as an extension of medical treatment

Much like physical therapy or work conditioning, placing recovering patients into physically suitable work can help them maintain their physical conditioning. It can also have significant psychosocial benefits for the patient and help maintain the employer/worker relationship.

Establish timelines

Establishing a timeline sets an expectation of recovery times and assists the employer in developing a safe and productive RTW program for your patient. The two most important timelines are:

- The earliest date your patient can safely return to alternate modified duties.
- The date your patient can safely resume his/her full duties.

Focus on abilities

An effective prescription for safe RTW is to focus on the individual's abilities. Objective medical limitations should be restricted to only the anatomical area of injury. To safely assign work activities, a good description of the claim-related physical restrictions is required. It's important that your patient (and their employer) understand what work duties can

and cannot be safely performed. Employers are much more likely to identify suitable work when they consider the patient's abilities rather than his or her restrictions.

RTW or Return-To-What?

As an attending physician, you are not expected to identify tasks or design work duties for a RTW plan. This requires a team effort that involves WCB PEI staff working with the employer and your input. However, you can assist the team by initiating the question, "Return to what?" The "what" refers to appropriate job tasks based on your patient's abilities, recommended physical activities and medical restrictions. The RTW process allows physicians to make medical decisions and employers to make employment decisions.

RTW is Good Medicine

WCB PEI understands that you consider the whole person when making decisions about whether your patient should return to work, when your patient should return to work and under what conditions. In many cases, a modified RTW plan is consistent with the physical, emotional, and social well-being of your patient. The work as therapy philosophy gives attending physicians an effective treatment option. WCB PEI is ready to assist you in implementing RTW plans.

For more information

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Information about our programs and services can be found at www.wcb.pe.ca

Adapted With Permission

WORK SAFE BC



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