IN-DEPTH REVIEW

Employment and the common cancers: return to work of cancer survivors

A. G. E. M. de Boer and M. H. W. Frings-Dresen

**Background** Support for the return to work of working-age adult cancer survivors is a major theme for occupational health professionals in Europe.

**Aims** To provide an overview of the outcomes of recent European research in this field and discusses future research directions to explore and improve the return-to-work experience of cancer survivors.

**Methods** European research, principally from English and Dutch language journals, on the subject of return to work was reviewed.

**Results** Few European interventions have been developed and evaluated which enhance returning to work in cancer patients. They include a nurse-based intervention in the UK, a group rehabilitation programme in Sweden, rehabilitation programmes in Germany and a specialist–occupational physician intervention in Holland. Also described are current evaluation and research into models of occupational health support that seek to improve the experience of cancer survivors in their interaction with work. The development of evidence-based guidelines by the Dutch Society of Occupational Medicine is described.

**Conclusions** Research within the European international scientific literature has begun to identify priorities for the successful rehabilitation of employees back to the workplace after cancer diagnosis.

**Key words** Cancer; Europe; re-integration; research; return to work; work.

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Return to work of cancer survivors: a European perspective

In a recent meta-analysis, we assessed the unemployment risk of survivors of cancer compared to healthy controls. The results of a total of 26 papers were combined, including 20 366 cancer survivors and 157 603 healthy controls. Fourteen studies were from the USA, seven from Europe and five from other countries. Overall, cancer survivors were 1.4 times more likely to be unemployed than healthy controls [1]. For survivors in the USA, the unemployment risk was 1.5 times higher compared to European survivors. After adjustment for diagnosis, age and background unemployment rate, this risk disappeared. In addition, Amir et al. [2] have described an overview of the published literature examining rate of return to work for cancer survivors in this issue of *Occupational Medicine*. Results show that, on average, 75% of working cancer survivors return to the workplace.

These reviews indicate that although many survivors do not have work-related problems, there is ample room for improving the guidance of cancer patients in their return to work process. Programmes addressing return-to-work and re-integration issues are potentially of value in all phases of the treatment and rehabilitation process. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the outcomes of European research in this field and of future research directions to improve the likelihood of successful return to work of cancer survivors.

Few European interventions have been developed and evaluated which enhance return to work in cancer patients. One of the first was the study by Maguire et al. [3] in the UK, performed in the early 1980s. In this study, performed in a university affiliated hospital, a specialist nurse was appointed to counsel patients undergoing mastectomy and who also monitored their progress after discharge. Results showed that patients counselled by the nurse showed a greater social recovery and return to work than patients who received care as usual (75 versus 54%). This study showed that advice on return to work can be given very early on in the treatment process and that re-integration to work could start within the hospital setting during early medical treatment. During the 1990s, a group rehabilitation programme was evaluated...
Ten steps of advice

1. Schedule an appointment with your occupational physician.
2. Keep in contact with your employer or line manager.
3. Keep in contact with your co-workers.
4. Draw up a return-to-work plan in consultation with your line manager and occupational physician.
5. Start to return to work before full recovery, but start with a very limited number of hours.
6. Make sure the return-to-work plan encompasses the date and number of hours of the week you will work.
7. Provide information on the prognosis of return to work.
8. Evaluate the return-to-work plan with your line manager every 2 weeks.
9. Draw up a second, less ambitious return-to-work plan that may be used if the first plan fails.
10. Provide an example of a return-to-work plan.
In addition, a multidisciplinary group of health care professionals including occupational physicians, oncologists, oncological nurses, general practitioners and psychiatrists, together with experts from the work field including patients and employers, developed an evidence-based guideline which will be published in May 2009.

The guideline consists of two parts. In the first part, advice is given on how to include the issue of ‘employment’ in monodisciplinary guidelines. The second part is aimed at professionals counselling working cancer patients and consists of three phases: diagnosis, treatment and recovery and re-integration and follow-up. For each phase, guidance on appropriate activities is provided. For instance, in the diagnostic phase, information on the work-related implications of the upcoming treatment is given and advice that an occupational physician should preferably communicate between specialist, employer or line-manager and the patient about work-related issues. In the re-integration phase, special attention should be paid to physical limitations and fatigue. Furthermore, re-integration programmes aimed at re-entry should be offered to the patient market of cancer survivors should be offered to the patient when appropriate.

In future research, several aspects need to be addressed. As Amir et al. [2] and Kennedy et al. [10] have indicated, not all cancer survivors have problems with return to work or have diminished work ability. Therefore, physicians should assess which patients are most in need of support for return to work based on patient preferences and evidence-based predictors of return to work. Those most in need can be assisted through recommendations about work resumption, work adaptation, communication with the employer or line manager and attending to cancer and treatment-related symptoms. Projects in which this risk selection is combined with a supportive intervention should be developed and evaluated. The oncology nurse could play a key role in establishing the risk of losing employment, communicating with the occupational physician and addressing return-to-work problems. Alternatively, the oncologist could assess the need for return to work support at an early stage and communicate with the primary care or occupational physician or nurse, who could subsequently provide tailored advice on work accommodations and return to work.

Finally, multidisciplinary guidelines are needed in more countries to enhance the shared care for cancer patients across disciplines and in cooperation with employers and colleagues. Research which evaluates the implementation of these guidelines and its effects on the care of cancer patients is required.

References