

Research to Action

WSIB and Ministry of Labour Show Strong Support for RAACWI

RAACWI's work has caught the attention of key decision-makers in Ontario, and their support is helping us reach two key goals: to encourage evidence-informed decision-making among workers' compensation boards and to increase sensitivity to injured workers' experiences.

The best example of this is the launch of a new "anti-stigma" initiative by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). The initiative is designed to eliminate any perception that injured workers are "lazy" or "scamming the system" from WSIB communications, front-line staff training and service delivery. RAACWI research and consultation were the impetus behind this important campaign.

WSIB President Jill Hutcheon made this clear at the RAACWI symposium held in Toronto last May. She talked about the impact made by the RAACWI stigma group when it sat down with WSIB staff to talk about the effect of stigmatizing attitudes on injured workers. "WSIB people expressed how grateful they were to be part of that meeting, and they came out with their eyes opened as to what needs to be done," she said.

That meeting spawned a series of subsequent ones on the topic of stigma. These ongoing dialogues with the WSIB, which have been labelled "blue sky discussions," were the driving force behind the decision to introduce the anti-stigma campaign, Hutcheon said. "I know changing attitudes and behaviours isn't easy,"


INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Research to Action	1
Research Update	2
Building Academic Capacity	2
Building Community Capacity	2
Knowledge Mobilization	3
Community Researcher Profile	5
Academic Researcher Profile	5
Partner Profile	6

she continued. "But I believe that, in partnership with RAACWI, we can make change." She also credited RAACWI as a partner in this initiative in her opening remarks in the WSIB's 2008 annual report.

The success of the collaboration between WSIB and RAACWI on the anti-stigma front spurred Ontario Minister of Labour Peter Fonseca to suggest similar discussions with his ministry. Speaking at the RAACWI symposium, Fonseca pointed to the six Ministry of Labour employees attending as evidence of his commitment to working with the injured worker community.

"With goodwill and collaboration, we will be able to build a stronger, more resilient system that is fair to everyone," he said. "It's crucial that we're all here to get it right. This is how constructive ideas emerge to address the obstacles of injured workers."

A second series of dialogues between WSIB and RAACWI is currently underway on return to work. Read more about it in a future issue of the newsletter. 

Research Update

RAACWI Project Receives New Funding

The Consequences of Work Injury: A Comparative Study of the Role of Doctors in Quebec and Ontario

Principal investigators: Katherine Lippel and Joan Eakin

A RAACWI project comparing the role of doctors in the compensation system and return to work of injured workers in Quebec and Ontario recently received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The project brings together researchers from the disciplines of sociology, law and medicine.

The researchers will document and compare the perceptions and behaviours of doctors in Quebec and Ontario. More specifically, the study will examine the social role of doctors in the compensation system and return-to-work process (e.g. how they view and interact with the system, its components, agents and participants), how this role is shaped by physician practices (e.g. procedural requirements, the regulatory/policy framework, economic incentives), and the situational conditions of medical work (e.g. medical specialty, location of work). 🌱

Building Academic Capacity



***Becky Casey, PhD
Student, RAACWI
Health and Well-being
Theme***

Becky Casey is currently pursuing her PhD in sociology at McMaster University under the supervision of Dr. Lori Campbell. Becky joined

the RAACWI Health and Well-being Theme as a student researcher. She will be using the data from the Injured Worker Health Survey led by Dr. Peri Ballantyne to examine the economic impacts of work injuries. She will compare this data to other Ontario/Canada age-matched population data from income and poverty surveys. Becky plans to focus on poverty and its relationship to aging concerns, such as loss of pensions through employment changes, reduced income following an injury, and lack of employment opportunities due to reduced physical abilities.

Becky's doctoral research interests stem from work she did while completing her MA at Lakehead University. Dr. Sharon Dale Stone, who is also a member of RAACWI, was her supervisor. Becky's master's research focused on the experiences of people aging with long-term physical impairments. While pursuing this degree, Becky also completed a post-graduate diploma in health services and policy research through the Ontario Training Centre. As part of her practicum, she completed a placement at the Thunder Bay and District Injured Workers' Support Group, where she investigated the consequences of work injuries. 🌱

Building Community Capacity

RAACWI Injured Workers' Speakers' School – A Growing Success!

Since its inception, the Injured Workers' Speakers' School has graduated numerous participants from three sessions in Toronto. The success of the school is evident in the many graduates who have started to write and speak publicly about their experiences, and have become more involved in RAACWI activities, community development and advocacy.

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The main purpose of the Speakers' School is to help injured workers build skills and confidence in public speaking and leadership, all in an atmosphere of peer support and mutual aid. During the sessions, participants gain experience telling their own story and learn about new knowledge produced by RAACWI researchers.

The injured worker community plans to build on the success of the Speakers' School by expanding it to other communities in Ontario. The school has been promoted within the Ontario Network of Injured Workers' Groups (ONIWG). As a result, Thunder Bay has begun a school using the materials and experience of the Toronto school. Similarly, the Hamilton Injured Workers' Group is getting help to launch a Speakers' School in its community early in the New Year. The community is also fundraising to sponsor a train-the-trainer session, which will bring together 16 participants from eight communities across the province. Plans are in the works to hold a four-day training session that prepares participants to organize and facilitate a Speakers' School in their own area.

Graduates of the school interested in building on their skills will soon be able to join a more advanced class. The Injured Workers' Graduate School is still in the early stages of development. The plan is to offer an advanced program that builds on the knowledge and experience gained in Speakers' School. Sessions will include both education and action components. Planned topics include conflict resolution, media relations, new RAACWI findings and working in groups.

It is hoped that the Speakers' School project will help develop new leaders in the injured worker community by enabling participants to build confidence and skills. Participants are encouraged to speak about the social and economic exclusion that may come in the wake of a work injury and to challenge negative perceptions that exist in society about injured workers.

Individuals interested in participating in this or other community activities are encouraged to contact Steve Mantis, the RAACWI community lead, at smantis@tbaytel.net or Orlando Buonastella, a RAACWI community researcher, at 416-461-2411. 

Knowledge Mobilization

RAACWI Symposium 2009: How RAACWI's Work is Making a Difference

Held in May, the symposium provided an opportunity for a diverse group of stakeholders to hear about the latest RAACWI activities and exchange ideas on the way forward.

In May of this year, RAACWI held its first stakeholder symposium to mark the halfway point of the initiative's funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council. The symposium brought together 75 people from all areas of the workers' compensation system. At the symposium, people heard about how far RAACWI has come in meeting its research, knowledge dissemination and capacity-building goals. They also learned how RAACWI's work is contributing to concrete change, practical tools and improved skills among both community and academic members.

For example, RAACWI research contributed to a new "anti-stigma" initiative at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB), which WSIB President Jill Hutcheon described at the symposium. She acknowledged that there exists "a very real perception that injured workers are 'lazy' and 'scamming' the system." This misperception exists among some employers who don't understand the need for time to heal, some neighbours who look skeptically upon an injured worker seen outside doing gardening, and even
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some WSIB staff who see employers as the paying client, forgetting that injured workers gave up their right to sue in the historical compromise that gave birth to the workers' compensation system.

Hutcheon promised to lead the way in combating this stigma. "Based on RAACWI research, we are introducing a new initiative this year to reduce stigmatizing attitudes and behaviours among WSIB front-line workers and WSIB communications," she said.

Another concrete outcome of RAACWI work is its involvement in a guide to help those injured workers whose safe and sustainable return to work might be getting bogged down in complications. The guide is based on Institute for Work & Health (IWH) research that identified the problems or "red flags," as well as RAACWI-funded workshops at which solutions or "green lights" were identified. "It focuses on those rare but potentially costly situations in which claims are not proceeding in a straightforward manner," IWH Scientist Ellen MacEachen, also a RAACWI researcher, said at the symposium.

Injured workers tell heartfelt stories

Perhaps most impressive is the degree to which RAACWI is increasing the ability of injured workers to get involved in research, and the ability of scientists to work with the injured worker community. RAACWI identified early on that, "in order for injured workers to participate as equals in research, and to share their research knowledge with other injured workers and decision-makers in workers' compensation and the provincial government, they need training to get their skills and confidence up," said RAACWI Community Lead Steve Mantis. "This has been a big success."

RAACWI offers the Injured Workers' Speakers' School, a weekly program lasting 12 weeks.

Upon completion, graduates are prepared to get more actively involved in research and to speak confidently. This was evident at the symposium, at which four graduates told their stories.

For example, Beryl Brown framed her story around the concept of "remembering" — remembering her joy and excitement about contributing to her new home in Canada, the day she heard her workplace injury might be permanent, and the days of pain, depression and poverty that followed. "I remember nights of great pain, praying to God for some measure of peace so I could sleep," she said. "I remember the mean things said by people who should have cared."

After hearing Brown and her colleagues, panel members commenting on the presentations unanimously agreed that the Speakers' School is working. "You are articulate spokespersons for injured workers, putting into words what others are silently thinking," one panel member said. "You have all touched my heart and the hearts of every other person in this room," another said.

As for the academic world, RAACWI Academic Lead Emile Tompa reported that the initiative has supported four post-doctoral fellows, 17 PhD/master's students and 10 undergraduate students. The hope is to build a group of new scientists who will continue to pursue community-based research interests.

Ontario Minister of Labour Peter Fonseca closed the RAACWI symposium on a positive note. "With goodwill and collaboration, we will be able to build a stronger, more resilient system that is fair to everyone," he said. 🌱

(Story adapted from an article in the Summer 2009 issue of *At Work*, the newsletter of the Institute for Work & Health.)

Community Researcher Profile

Strength in Numbers: A Profile of Maryam, a RAACWI Community Participant

It was over 20 years ago that Maryam came to Canada as a young, healthy single woman, with great hopes to settle in a country that protects the dignity of all individuals, with fairness and appreciation. Maryam chose to work and to educate herself. She became an early childhood education teacher, a wife, a mother and, above all, a proud Canadian.

Maryam worked at a private Montessori pre-school in North York, where she was often assigned to work with the most difficult, special needs children. Her job involved a lot of lifting and other physically demanding tasks. Over time, she developed chronic back pain and suffered a work-related back injury that led to emergency surgery.

Because she had no private insurance or workers' compensation coverage, she returned to work despite serious nerve damage and crippling pain. Finally, she was unable to work at all. The time that followed was very dark for her family, particularly because of financial constraints. Maryam was plagued everyday by collection agencies, and was forced to rely on food from relief organizations and money from friends and family overseas. She battled depression, fear and anxiety, and the stress and suffering caused further health complications.

What was most troublesome was the fact that there was no protection for teachers like Maryam, who work in private daycare facilities. She discovered that over one-third of Ontarians are not covered by the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act*, because the law allows their employers not to participate. As insecure as life appeared, it was clear that she was not alone.

Maryam made two commitments to herself: to do whatever it took to bring her health back, and to do whatever it took to change the system so that others did not suffer as she did. She became an activist for the cause of universal workers' compensation coverage.

An important turning point in her struggle against so many obstacles came when she found support from Injured Workers' Consultants (IWC). She joined a group based at IWC called "Women of Inspiration." As well, through the Injured Workers' Speakers' School, she overcame her fear of public speaking and has since been able to speak out for her cause.

Maryam has found that reaching out to organizations like IWC and RAACWI can be the first step for an injured worker to begin the process of regaining strength, health and dignity. The old saying is absolutely true – "there is strength in numbers." 🌀

Academic Researcher Profile



Sharon Dale Stone, Researcher, Health & Well-being Theme

Sharon Dale Stone is professor and chair of sociology at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, where she is also affiliated with the women's studies, gerontology, and master's of public health programs. She teaches courses to both undergraduate and graduate students on disability, health and illness, and social gerontology. Her research focuses on experiences of living with chronic impairments and issues that arise from such conditions. All of her research uses qualitative methods to learn
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about people's experiences in an in-depth way. Prior to becoming involved with RAACWI, she collaborated with injured workers on research about the benefits of peer support. Within RAACWI, Sharon is working under the Health and Well-Being Theme to examine injured workers' experiences of stigma and the impact of stigma on self-esteem.

Sharon is also collaborating with a team of researchers to study the workplace experiences of academics with multiple sclerosis. She recently published a book that profiles selected narratives of women who survived a hemorrhagic stroke at a young age (*A Change of Plans*: Sumach Press, 2007). She plans a follow-up book that will offer a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of all the women she has interviewed. 🌱

Partner Profile

University of Toronto – Home to the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

The University of Toronto has been an important partner of the RAACWI initiative. Two key departments are involved — the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and the Department of Occupational Sciences and Occupational Therapy.

The Dalla Lana School of Public Health has a long and rich history of research and teaching in public health, which goes back to the early part of the 20th century. Funding provided by the Rockefeller Foundation helped establish a school of hygiene at the University of Toronto in 1925-27. The school was merged with the Departments of Preventive Medicine and Behavioural Science, eventually forming the Department of Public Health Sciences. In 2008, the department became the Dalla Lana School of Public Health.

Joan Eakin, a member of the RAACWI Legislation Theme, is a professor in the Social and Behavioural Sciences Division of the School of Public Health, where she teaches research methodology and does research in the field of work, health and safety. Ellen MacEachen, a member of the Health and Well-being Theme, and Emile Tompa, RAACWI's academic lead, are both assistant professors at the school.

The University of Toronto is also the birthplace of Canadian academic studies in the area of occupational therapy. The program began in 1918 and has thrived ever since. The Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy is renowned for its leadership in the profession and has graduated many scholars in the field. Bonnie Kirsh, who is currently the academic co-lead of the RAACWI Health and Well-being Theme, is an associate professor in the department. There, she teaches research methods and psychosocial perspectives in occupational therapy, as well researches community and work integration for persons with mental illnesses. 🌱

Research Action Alliance on the Consequences of Work Injury

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