



Research Feature

RAACWI Injured Worker Health Survey Panel I completed

This first wave of a longitudinal study on health trajectories and health-care utilization among injured workers reveals the challenges of living with a workplace injury.

Principal Investigator: Peri Ballantyne

Co-investigators: Pat, Fergal O'Hagan, Emile Tompa, Marion Endicott, Steve Mantis

Any workplace injury has consequences for workers and their families, but if the injury has led to a permanent impairment, the challenges are likely greater. To better understand the impact of work injury on health and employment, injured workers with permanent impairments were surveyed from across Ontario from 2008 to 2009. The study aimed to capture a sense of what life is like for injured workers, looking at trends in health and work situations.

There were 494 surveys completed by 195 men and 299 women. All had filed first-time claims with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) that resulted in a permanent impairment following a workplace accident. Survey respondents were aged between 25 and 57. Half of them lived in larger cities. The remaining respondents were split between medium-sized cities and smaller communities.

The information from this study is useful for identifying needs and designing programs to respond to the labour-market and health outcomes of permanently impaired workers.

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Survey highlights

- Stress, chronic pain and medication use were common among respondents.
- Almost half said that most days were stressful. Personal health, financial situations and work were the major sources of stress.
- Almost half were unemployed. Those who were employed after their injuries experienced losses in income and benefits.

About the injuries

All survey respondents received a Non-Economic Loss (NEL) award. A NEL is received if a workplace injury results in a permanent impairment. The NEL is based on the percentage of total bodily impairment as assessed by the WSIB. Of respondents that recalled their NEL assessment, 90 per cent reported receiving an assessment of 35 per cent impairment or less.

What caused the permanent impairment?

- Over-exertion was the main cause for 41 per cent, while half had a repetitive strain injury.
- Almost seven in 10 had an "invisible" injury.
- Nearly half had multiple injuries following the workplace accident.

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Health profiles

Stress, chronic pain and medication use were common. Seventy-five per cent of respondents said their health is somewhat or much worse than before the workplace injury. Half of the participants said that most days were quite a bit or extremely stressful. Personal health, financial situation, and work (or lack of work) were cited as the major sources of stress.

In addition, a variety of chronic health conditions were reported. Almost 70 per cent said they had a chronic pain disorder. In most cases, this diagnosis was made after the workplace injury. The specific health issue and the percentage of workers reporting them were:

- back pain (55%)
- nerve pain (49%)
- mobility impairment (44%)
- repetitive strain injury (RSI) (42%)
- arthritis (41%)
- musculoskeletal pain (39%)
- high blood pressure (26%)

In addition, many reported difficulties sleeping, concentrating, anxiety and depression as well as experiencing stigma from a co-worker, supervisor, WSIB staff, doctor or prospective employer.

Four in 10 respondents reported being unable to receive the necessary health care over the past year. In most cases, this was for a physical problem, but some also reported needing treatment for an emotional or mental health problem.

Many managed pain with medications. Eighty per cent reported using medications regularly, at least once a week. Sixty per cent regularly used four or more medical drugs. However, some reported being unable to get medications or use them as often as directed because of costs.


Employment and wages

There were substantial changes in work situations among many workers. Even those who had work after their injury experienced losses in income and benefits. Among employed survey participants, about half were in the same or similar job as before the injury and half remained with the same employer. In total, 38 per cent of participants were unemployed at the time of the survey. Those who were unemployed indicated that their health condition or disability affected the ability to look for work. In fact, one-third reported they were permanently unable to seek work. Many also said that they could not find work that accommodated their health or abilities.

Becoming a worker with a permanent impairment was associated with changes in job security, income levels and a variety of benefits for those employed after the injury. Specifically, the following changes were reported:

- permanent job status (dropped 12%)
- average annual income before deductions (dropped from \$39,000 to \$32,000)
- part-time hours worked/week (increased 5%)
- full-time hours worked/week (dropped 31%)
- union coverage (dropped 11%)
- retirement pension plan (dropped 14%)
- extended health plan (dropped 16%)
- prescription drug coverage (dropped 19%)
- dental plan (dropped 18%).

Loss of secure (permanent, full time) work, income and benefits no doubt has serious consequences for the worker, as well as for the workers' family.

Follow-up research with a selection of survey participants is ongoing. It looks more closely at the health situation of these workers, using the case study method and a survey on the use of prescription drugs. Plans are also underway to compare the experiences of these claimants with that of the Canadian population using data from Statistics Canada surveys. 

Research Update

New RAACWI Research Project on Experience Rating

A critical review of literature on experience rating in workers' compensation systems

Investigators: Ellen MacEachen, Emile Tompa, Marion Endicott, Liz Mansfield, Heather Scott-Marshall

Several academic and community researchers within RAACWI have come together to undertake a critical review of the literature on experience rating in workers' compensation systems. Experience rating is the practice of adjusting the cost of workers' compensation premiums for employers based on their past claims costs. In Ontario, it is done through rebates and surcharges.

The review will evaluate qualitative and quantitative literature on the topic of experience rating, with a focus on how they inform our understanding of the workers' compensation systems. Academic studies as well as policy briefs, news reports and trade journals will be included. Four broad categories of issues will be evaluated:

- What is known about how experience rating motivates employer and worker behavior, and what beliefs are not well supported by research?
- What is known about the effects of experience rating on workplace health and safety?
- How does the design of programs vary across different workers' compensation systems?
- How can the financial incentive of other benefits and insurance programs inform our understanding about premium-setting in workers' compensation?

The study will highlight the logic and rationale of experience rating, its different forms in different

workers' compensation systems, and its effects on workplace health and safety as well as unintended consequences.

The project has a time frame of 12 months and is targeted for completion in the spring of 2011. 🔄

Building Academic Capacity



***Heather Scott-Marshall,
The Dan Ublanski Post-doctoral Fellow***

RAACWI awarded a new post-doc this spring. The post-doc is named in honour of Dan Ublansky, a workers' advocate who was an active participant in RAACWI until his untimely death in 2008. Ublansky was Lawyer/Director of the Toronto Workers' Health & Safety Legal Clinic, a post he held since 1993.

The recipient of this post-doc is Dr. Heather Scott-Marshall. She is a social scientist with a background in occupational health. She recently completed her PhD in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Toronto. Her research plans include a project examining the determinants of poverty in workers with a permanent impairment. Objectives of the project are: 1) to investigate changes in the prevalence of poverty in the injured worker population over time; 2) to examine differences in the prevalence of poverty under different types of workers' compensation programs; and, 3) to develop a model of the significant predictors of poverty in permanently impaired workers. For the past two years, Dr. Scott-Marshall has been involved in research at the Institute for Work & Health on the social and economic consequences of work injury. Her projects in this area include an analysis of marital formation patterns in

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permanently impaired workers, and an evaluation of the adequacy and equity of different workers' compensation benefits programs in Canada. Another aspect of her research examines the health consequences of precarious employment experiences, as well as social inequalities in exposures to these experiences. The research focuses on how specific groups of workers are more vulnerable to adverse employment circumstances due to age, gender or race. Dr. Scott-Marshall has published research on the political economy of work, highlighting the impact of globalization and labour market restructuring on contemporary employment relations and the consequences for health. 🌱

Research to Action

Knowledge Exchange through Theatre

By Orlando Buonastella

Performing skits is a long and treasured tradition in the injured workers' movement. Injured workers have little political power, but possess great powers of observation which reveal a unique perspective of the compensation system. Sometimes the challenges and opposition they face readily lend themselves to satire, a form of writing using humour as a weapon to criticize.

Many assume that injured workers are angry and not disposed to fun and wit. Yet skits created and enjoyed by injured workers show us the contrary. Skits allow injured workers to laugh over shared experiences and help us by shedding light into a system that is difficult to understand. Here are some examples of skits by injured workers and community advocates that use satire to inform and entertain:

The "Compensationese" skit, for example, plays off the many Bills and pieces of legislation affecting injured workers. In this skit, umpteen

new Bills were written to help the situation of injured workers but all of the Bills contained such bureaucratic language that none of them helped anyone. In an effort to prevent the downfall of injured workers the nonsensical administration also deleted the word "homeless" from the official vocabulary.

The "Ideal Compensation Board" is a skit that imagines the compensation system really working for the injured worker, with justice and humanity speedily rendered.

An injured worker named Mr. Povero was the lead character in many skits created in the nineties. All of his attempts to get an answer to his problems as an injured worker were thwarted. Eventually he was told to throw away his medication and was sent to a magic healing ceremony where he was to be healed before he turned 65 - when compensation benefits stopped legislatively.

"Hunky Dory Inc." is a skit where return to work really works. All kinds of experts in ergonomics and psychology along with a humane and understanding employer help the injured workers truly function in a fully and permanently accommodated dream job. The skit contrasts a utopian return-to-work situation envisioned by researchers with the sometimes unfulfilling and ineffective process that many injured workers actually experience.

"Auditors and other lovers" is a family discussion between two prominent auditors, husband and wife, about the "cost" of injured workers.

These are only a few examples that show the potential that skits have in "knowledge exchange." They provide fun and therapy, yet they make a point. Participants and audiences have found that sometimes a point of criticism is more acceptable to a decision-maker or political leader than a formal submission, as everyone must be open to a good laugh, so to speak. 🌱

Building Community Capacity

Speaker School Successes in Hamilton & Thunder Bay

As we reported in our last newsletter, our Speakers' School is expanding on a number of fronts. We have started a graduate class in Toronto that meets once each month around the theme: "From convincing to engaging." Graduates from the Injured Worker Speakers' School meet to continue to build their speaking skills and to support each other in the process of engaging a larger audience. Grads have been meeting with various government and WCB/WSIB officials as well as speaking at community events.

The Thunder Bay Speakers' School, which grew out of the Toronto school, is now in its third year and its fourth class. Students will be graduating in late May. A big boost came on May 6th when the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) gave the Thunder Bay school the Rainford Jackson Education and Development Fund Award at their annual convention in Toronto. The award recognizes work that aims to reduce racism and to improve the condition of minorities in our society through education and organization.

A new school has started up in Hamilton as a partnership with the Hamilton District Injured Workers' Group with the first class scheduled to graduate in early June. Organizers have developed a facilitator's manual that is being "road tested" and the reports coming out of Hamilton are positive.

There is interest in expanding the Speakers' School to other communities in Ontario and we are working on a plan to facilitate this. Anyone interested in finding out how to get involved is

welcome to contact Steve Mantis at 807-767-9633 or smantis@tbaytel.net

As you may know from previous newsletters, the main purpose of the Speakers' School is to build skills and confidence in public speaking and leadership among injured workers in an atmosphere of peer support and mutual aid. In the sessions participants gain experience telling their own stories and learn about new knowledge produced by RAACWI researchers.

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

New Blue Sky Discussions on Return to Work

The Return to Work (RTW) Blue Sky group has held several joint WSIB-RAACWI meetings since the fall of 2009 and now meets every six weeks. The general approach has been to begin with a broad sweep of RTW issues in order to identify topics of concern and interest to the group. The discussion has been guided by various scientific papers on return to work. The group has discussed worker-employer social relations in RTW in small businesses, the kinds of evidence and "hurt versus harm" logic that provides a discourse or rationale for early RTW, and at the next meeting will discuss the role and interests of different stakeholders in RTW. These meetings help everyone to consider RTW issues from different positions: WSIB, injured worker, researcher, and worker representative. The WSIB initiative is led by Joe Sgro. RAACWI members involved with this initiative are Constanza Duran, Laura Lunasky, Ellen MacEachen, Iggy Kosny, Basil Boolis, Karl Crevar, Barry Cowles and Patricia Reilly. 🌱

Academic Researcher Profile



Bonnie Kirsh
RAACWI Co-Academic
Lead, Health Theme

Bonnie Kirsh, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational

Therapy and the Graduate Department of Rehabilitation Science at the University of Toronto. She is cross-appointed to the Department of Psychiatry, is an Adjunct Scientist at the Institute for Work & Health, and an Adjunct Professor at Dalhousie's School of Occupational Therapy.

Her primary research focuses on factors that improve the work lives of persons with mental health issues and she has published widely in this area. She has conducted research examining experiences of people with mental health issues who are attempting to integrate into the workforce and has studied the relationship of organizational culture and employment. She has examined Canadian principles and practices in the area of work integration and is studying supported employment in a pan-Canadian project examining the operationalization and impacts of this model.

Additional areas of research include workplace stigma, disability management and employer needs in supervising individuals with mental health problems. Her research also addresses the experiences of injured workers, and in particular, the stigma that they encounter and their mental health needs. She has recently been appointed to the Workforce Advisory Committee of the Mental Health Commission of Canada, has been an invited speaker on the topic of employment to numerous conferences, and is a former chair of the board of CMHA Toronto. 🌱

Partner Profile

Office of the Worker Adviser

The Office of the Worker Adviser (OWA) is an agency of the Ministry of Labour whose mandate is to advise, educate and represent non-unionized injured workers and their survivors. The OWA provides its services free of charge.

The year 2010 marks the OWA's 25th anniversary. The OWA was established in 1985 under the *Workers' Compensation Act* and continued under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*. The Ministry of Labour receives reimbursement from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board for the cost of operating the OWA, but the OWA is independent of the WSIB.

The OWA serves all of Ontario through 15 full-service offices. The OWA staff also routinely visit a number of other communities that do not have a full-time office. The OWA has 97 staff: Front-line staff including worker advisers who represent injured workers on appeals, and program assistants who provide information and assistance in-person and over the phone.

In the 2009–10 fiscal year the OWA assisted more than 14,000 individuals and generated more than 3,500 appeals decisions.


The OWA also provides extensive public information materials and resources on its website including fact sheets on workers' compensation topics, self-help kits and answers to frequently asked questions.

The OWA is a partner in RAACWI and has served an important role through its sharing of information and networking with injured workers, researchers and other community partners. For more information on the OWA, visit www.owa.gov.ca. 🌱

Project Updates & News

RAACWI's Long-term Plans

RAACWI recently received a one-year extension of its mandate from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This means that the initiative will continue to operate with the funds awarded by SSHRC until March, 2012.

A sub-committee within RAACWI is planning how the initiative can continue its important work after the SSHRC mandate is fulfilled. In fact, the meeting of the entire RAACWI group held on May 18 at the Textile Museum focused on what participants have labeled "RAACWI after SSHRC." RAACWI participants plan to continue the discussion over the next year in order to identify funding sources and an organizational model for RAACWI after SSHRC. 


Community Forums

Three RAACWI community forums were held at Injured Workers' Consultants offices since our last newsletter.

In the November forum participants explored the topic of deeming. This was a fun-filled afternoon with skits, case examples, and research on the topic.

In February the community forum reviewed the recently released Auditor General's 2009 Report and discussed what it means for injured workers. The group learned about WSIB's unfunded liability through the Report and discussed what his recommendations could mean for injured workers.

In January forum participants gathered together to learn about knowledge mobilization and how to build public awareness through the media. Participants gained a better understanding of the media in Ontario through former CBC announcer

John McGrath. The group explored how it can get media attention for RAACWI research. To learn about upcoming forums see the announcement section on page 8. 

RAACWI Researchers Presenting at the 2010 Canadian Association for Research on Work and Health (CARWH) Conference

This year the CARWH conference is being held in Toronto on May 28 and 29. The Institute for Work & Health, one of RAACWI's principal partner organizations, is hosting the conference. Several RAACWI researchers will also be presenting their work at this conference. Following are some highlights.

Dr. Peri Ballantyne will present some of her research described in the cover story of this newsletter issue titled "Health status of injured workers with permanent impairments: comparisons by income status."

Dr. Joan Eakin and Marion Endicott will lead a "Research into action" symposium on addressing the stigma experienced by injured workers.

The theme of stigma will continue with a presentation by Dr. Eakin titled "The stigmatization of injured workers: The construction of 'unworthiness' in the compensation process."

Dr. Ellen MacEachen will be presenting her research titled "That's not part of the compensable injury: Subcontractor relations and the under-recognition of health problems among injured workers in Ontario's Labour-Market Re-Entry program."

Dr. Renée-Louise Franche will be presenting her systematic review on workplace-based interventions for return-to-work and work functioning outcomes among workers with common mental health conditions.

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Dr. Katherine Lippel will be presenting on the role of physicians in workers' compensation systems in Quebec and Ontario and the relevance for research and practice in return to work.

Dr. Emile Tompa will be presenting research on benefits adequacy and equity of three Canadian workers' compensation programs for long-term disability.

Dr. Agnieszka Kosny will be presenting her research on new immigrants' experiences after a work injury. 🌱

RAACWI Members to Participate in the Work Disability Prevention (WDP) Program

Two community researchers from RAACWI, Steve Mantis and Marion Endicott, have been invited to participate as panelists in a symposium on sociopolitical challenges in work disability prevention with a focus on chronic pain and work. The symposium is part of the WDP Program to be held at the University of Toronto in June.

To give a bit of history of the WDP Program at the University of Toronto, it began in April 2009 with a team including 29 investigators/teachers from 16 universities and nine research centres in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United States. Dr. Patrick Loisel, the lead of the initiative, was awarded a renewal of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Strategic Training Program grant on work disability prevention. The program first obtained funding from CIHR in 2002, and was originally hosted by the University of Sherbrooke. Starting June 2010, the program will be held at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

The RAACWI Theatre Group has also been invited to perform a skit at the WDP program as a pre-dinner event on the evening of the symposium on sociopolitical challenges. 🌱

Announcements

RAACWI Full Team Meeting

RAACWI's Full Team Meeting was held on Tuesday May 18, 2010 at the Textile Museum. All are welcome to these team meetings. Email smacdonald@iwh.on.ca.

Forum Presentations

May 20, 1–5 p.m. Ellen MacEachen
Labour-market Re-entry (LMR) Research Study

June 18, 10-2 p.m. Emile Tompa
Benefits Adequacy and Labour-market
Experiences after a Permanent Impairment

Community Forums are open to everyone and are held at IWC (815 Danforth Ave, Suite 411).

Canadian Association of Research for Work and Health (CARWH): Worker Health in a Changing World of Work

To be held on May 28-29, 89 Chestnut Street.
<http://carwh2010.iwh.on.ca>

Research Action Alliance on the Consequences of Work Injury

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