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**I declare no conflict of interest**

# A time for reflection: international work disability policy challenges and directions

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# After 3 decades of work disability policy ....

- Work activation policies
- Where have we landed?



# The benefits cost problem

“Spending on disability benefits has become a significant burden to public finances in most OECD countries and hinders economic growth as it reduces effective labour supply.”

(OECD, 2010)



# “The Science and Politics of Work Disability Policy”: 13 Countries



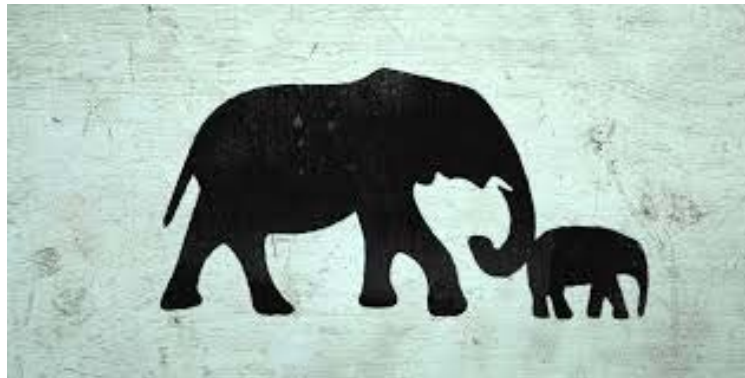
# The Science and Politics of Work Disability Prevention

New York: Routledge (forthcoming Oct or Nov 2018)

- Ch. 1. Work Disability Policy: Current Challenges and New Questions (E. MacEachen)
- Ch. 2. Reflections on The Sherbrooke Model and the Way Forward for Work Disability Prevention (P. Loisel)
- Ch. 3. Work Disability in the United States: A Fragmented System (A. Dembe)
- Ch. 4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Regulatory Systems Designed to Prevent Work Disability After Injury or Illness: An Overview of Mechanisms in a Selection of Canadians Compensation Systems (K. Lippel)
- Ch. 5. The Australian Work Disability Patchwork (G. Grant)
- Ch. 6. The New Zealand Universal Accident Scheme: Problems Solved and New Challenges (G. Duncan)
- Ch. 7. An Overview of Work Disability Policies in China (D. Shan)
- Ch. 8. Reforming Activation in Swedish Work Disability Policy (C. Ståhl & I. Seing)
- Ch. 9. Work-Disability Prevention in Finland: Promoting Work Ability through Occupational Health Collaboration (KP Martimo)
- Ch. 10. Work Disability Prevention in France: Organizational and Political Challenges (J.B. Fassier)
- Ch. 11. Work Disability Policy in Germany – Experiences of Collective and Individual Participation and Cooperation (F. Welte)
- Ch. 12. Keeping People at Work: New Work Disability Prevention Measures in Switzerland (T. Geisen)
- Ch. 13. Disability Prevention Policies in Belgium: Navigating between Scientific and Socioeconomic Influences (P. Mairiaux)
- Ch. 14. Work Disability Prevention in the Netherlands: A Key Role for Employers (A. DeRijk)
- Ch. 15. The Rise and Fall of Income Replacement Disability Benefit Receipt in the United Kingdom: What are the Consequences of Reforms? (B. Barr & P. McHale)
- Ch. 16. Science, Politics and Values in Work Disability Policy: A Reflection on Trends and The Way Forward (E. MacEachen & K. Ekberg)

# Values in work disability policies—beyond the numbers

- Values and assumptions inherent in activation policy approaches
- Every policy is based on a hypothetical subject
  - Homo economicus
  - Work disability policy: “mutual obligations” (OECD 2013)
- Latent notion of sluggishness of individuals, who require a nudge





# I. Tightening the inflow, facilitating the outflow

## Tightening the *inflow* to sickness/disability benefits

- Restricting eligibility (medical assessments)
- Reducing benefits amount, duration of sick leave benefits
- Early return to work



## Different strategies for implementing work activation

- Work accommodations – introducing part-time sick leave benefits
  - Versus the “all or nothing” approach
- Timing of “early” return to work
  - Shaped by timing of beginning of official work incapacity
  - 0 days or 6 weeks? What is optimal for workers?
- Duration of work disability benefits
  - Time- or cost-limited/until age of old age pension
  - Lump sum?
- Policy assumptions in every strategy
  - When work benefits end the person is no longer deserving/other social safety nets will catch them

## Facilitating the *outflow* to work

- Vocational rehabilitation
- Job coaching
- Nudging employers to not dismiss workers on sick leave/ to reintegrate workers



## II. A new focus: fairness to employers

- The state is asking more from employers
  - Active management of work absence, reduce burden on state
- Is this attractive to employers? Sometimes ... depends in the financial and control context

Push back: More rules (Stahl & Seing, forthcoming)

Acceptance: Greater employer control (deRijk, forthcoming;  
Duncan, forthcoming)

➤ Policy assumption: fair employers, good labour relations

# III. The role of health care providers in activation-approaches

## Changes to the gatekeeper role

- Family doctors/social insurance physicians/occupational physicians
- Move since 1990's to restrict health care gatekeepers ....
  - Government approved doctors/ employer-hired occupational physicians
- ... or to blur gatekeeper responsibility:
  - Range of allied health profession/ independent medical exams/ internal medical consultants
  - The insurance case manager decides what assessments to accept for eligibility determination

## **Politicisation of health care with shifts in assumptions about the role and value of health care providers**

- Family physicians were trusted for professional competence, ethics
- Now doctors must be specially approved by the state or aligned with the employer
- Cast as “advocates” (Kosny et al., 2016)
- Conflict amongst doctors
  - USA: Mistrust among treating physicians and independent medical examiners (Dembe, forthcoming)
  - France: Tension between treating physicians, social insurance physicians, occupational physician (Fassier, forthcoming)



# IV. Ongoing work disability policy challenges

## 1. From nudging individuals to focus on labour demand

- Reluctance to hire certain workers: who are somewhat unhealthy, somewhat impaired, older (Barr & McHale, forthcoming)
- In context of non-bouyant economies: Is activation reasonable when demand for jobs outstrips supply? (Mairiaux, forthcoming, Martin 2015)

## 2. Decent jobs

- Low wage, unstable jobs that do not offer good career prospects or lift people out of poverty (Martin, 2015; Raffass, 2017)

### **3. Benefit inequity**

- Payments are much more generous for some claimants than others (Duncan, forthcoming)
- Benefits can be inaccessible to those with non-standard jobs, e.g. self-employed, short term contracts
- Broader environment of income inequality

### **4. Mental health**

- Has surpassed musculoskeletal injury as leading cause for disability pension (MacEachen et al. 2017)
- Impact of activation approaches on mental health

# Conclusion

- Work disability policies can play an important role in social and economic integration
- Look beyond the macro-economic picture – policies with ground level realities in mind
- Values are inherent in policies – they are a sign post for policy making and implementation



## Selected references (in addition to the Science and Politics of Work Disability Policy chapters)

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Thank You!

Questions?

