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
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. Welti)
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)
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
  o USA: Mistrust among treating physicians and independent medical examiners (Dembe, forthcoming)
  o 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)


Thank You!

Questions?