



Australasian Faculty of Occupational
and Environmental Medicine



The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians

Australasian Consensus Statement on the Health Benefits of Work

At the heart of this consensus statement regarding the health benefits of work is a shared desire to improve the welfare of individuals, families and communities.

Realising the health benefits of work for all Australians requires a paradigm shift in thinking and practice. It necessitates cooperation between many stakeholders, including government, employers, unions, insurance companies, legal practitioners, advocacy groups, and the medical, nursing and allied health professions.

We commit to working together to encourage and enable Australians to achieve the health and wellbeing benefits of work. We acknowledge the following fundamental principles about the relationship between health and work.

- Work is generally good for health and wellbeing
- Long term work absence, work disability and unemployment have a negative impact on health and wellbeing
- Work must be safe so far as is reasonably practicable
- Work is an effective means of reducing poverty and social exclusion, including that faced by indigenous populations and other currently disadvantaged groups. With appropriate support, many of those who have the potential to work, but are not currently working because of economic or social inequalities, illness or acquired or congenital disability, can access the benefits of work
- Work practices, workplace culture, work-life balance, injury management programs and relationships within workplaces are key determinates, not only of whether people feel valued and supported in their work roles, but also of individual health, wellbeing and productivity
- Individuals seeking to enter the workforce for the first time, seeking reemployment or attempting to return to work after a period of injury or illness, face a complex situation with many variables. Good outcomes are more likely when individuals understand the health benefits of work, and are empowered to take responsibility for their own situation
- Health professionals exert a significant influence on work absence and work disability, particularly in relation to medical sickness certification practices. This influence provides health professionals with many opportunities for patient advocacy, which includes, but is not limited to, recognition of the health benefits of work.

Government, employers, unions, insurance companies, legal practitioners, advocacy groups, and the medical, nursing and allied health professions all have a role to play in promoting the health benefits of work. Through actions appropriate to our various areas of responsibility or activity, we agree to:

- Promote awareness of the health benefits of work
- Offer support and encouragement to those attempting to access the health benefits of work
- Encourage employers' continuing support of workers' occupational health, and
- Advocate for continuous improvement in public policy around work and health, in line with the principles articulated above.

The role of GPs in realising the health benefits of work

The family doctor is best placed to advise and educate patients that, in most cases, a focus on return to work is in the best interest of the patient – for both their future and quality of life and that of their family.

Return to work is not possible for everyone, but certifying time off work – particularly when absence is long term – can have significant side effects, including increased rates of overall mortality, poorer physical health and poorer mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Simple messages delivered in the clinical environment can encourage patients to develop evidence-based views of the relationship between health and work. Evidence-based messages include:

- Work is an important part of rehabilitation
- The longer someone is off work, the less chance they have of ever returning
- Most common health conditions will not be 'cured' by treatment
- Work is a therapeutic intervention, it is part of treatment
- Even when work is uncomfortable or difficult, it usually does not cause lasting damage
- Typically, waiting for recovery delays recovery
- Staying away from work may lead to depression, isolation and poorer health, and
- Employer-supported, early return to work helps recovery, prevents deconditioning and helps provide patients with appropriate social contacts and support mechanisms.

Practical ways of assisting patients back to employment and optimum functioning include:

- Recommending a graduated increase in activity and setting a timeline for return to work
- Talking to the employer (preferably while the patient is with you), especially about how to modify the workplace and work duties to allow return to work
- Collaboratively identifying obstacles – and solutions – in the workplace
- Being clear about what health care can and can't achieve, and
- Identifying possible sources of support, including family members, co-workers and relevant government services.

Realising the Health Benefits of Work www.healthbenefitsofwork.edu.au is a position statement of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM), under the auspices of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians. Realising the health benefits of work presents compelling international and Australasian evidence that **work is generally good for health and wellbeing**, and that long term work absence, work disability and unemployment generally have a negative impact on health and wellbeing.

Since it was first circulated in July 2010, the subsequent Australian and New Zealand Consensus Statement on the Health Benefits of Work (overleaf) has drawn support from a wide range of stakeholders in both Australia and New Zealand, including the Committee of the Presidents of the Medical Colleges, The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Business Council of Australia, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Worksafe Victoria. **Real change, however, cannot be effected without on the ground support from General Practitioners.**