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Returning to Work and Long Term Disability Forms: What Should You and Your Physician Consider?

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Many patients recovering from treatment are keen to return to work as quickly as possible. However, it is not always clear how a brain tumor or its treatment will affect a person's ability to return to work. People are often more successful with early rehabilitation and may be able to access rehabilitation services through a work-related disability plan. If this is the case, there are several factors to consider with your doctor when planning the much-anticipated step of getting back to work. Even if rehabilitation is not available through a long-term disability plan, these points are relevant when pursuing government funded rehabilitation.

A brain tumor or treatment for a tumor may result in changes in your thinking abilities, such as impairments in short-term memory, attention and concentration. You may also find changes in your physical capacities, such as a lower energy level, muscle weakness and changes in mobility. You may notice these changes as you go about your activities at home. Perhaps you cannot care for yourself and your family the same way as before. Too often patients with a history of a brain tumor return to the demands of work and what seemed like small changes at home become significant barriers if they are not recognized and addressed. When it is unclear how these changes will affect your ability to work, it will be helpful if your physician includes the following recommendations on your insurance form: "I recommend that this individual undergo a neuropsychological evaluation for vocational purposes, in conjunction with a job analysis, to assess employability. If indicated, appropriate intervention from a brain injury specialist is needed to facilitate the return to work."

The form is completed in this manner to help insurance companies to fairly determine employability, and if appropriate, to optimize your chance to successfully return to work. It is important to have these assessments to either safeguard your benefits or to help you get back to work under the right conditions.

This approach is recommended for the following reasons:

- A neuropsychological assessment is the best way to identify any cognitive or thinking difficulties that you might have. A neuro-psychologist will provide assessments, training, education and counselling related to changes in the brain and a neuro-psychology assessment consists of a series of tests to measure your emotional state and cognitive and perceptual abilities, and is far more detailed than a basic neurological assessment. It is the best way to pinpoint subtle cognitive problems.
- The term 'for vocational rehabilitation purposes' is best used to make it clear that the neuro-psychology assessment is intended to determine how cognitive changes will impact your ability to work. The term 'in conjunction with a job analysis' is also important so the assessment is used to determine your ability to do your job. In a job analysis, activities and responsibilities of your job are analyzed so that it can be determined how well your changed abilities match the demands of your job. For example, short-term memory changes might not be a significant barrier for an assembly line worker who performs repetitive tasks. However,

memory changes could pose significant problems for a nurse who needs to remember information about a variety of patients.

- If it is found that your cognitive changes will influence your ability to do your job, intervention by a brain injury specialist is recommended, typically a vocational rehabilitation counselor who has expertise in brain injury. The Canadian Human Rights legislation dictates that an employer has a duty to accommodate an individual who has a disability, including a decline of cognitive functioning. A brain injury specialist can give guidance to the employer on how to make reasonable accommodations to help you get back to work. This rehabilitation professional can assess and negotiate modifications (accommodations) to the job, such as a change in hours, duties, break times, and physical demands. A brain injury specialist is able to educate the employer about the challenges the returning worker will experience and help reduce or overcome these challenges.

A final issue you will want your doctor to consider when completing a long-term disability form is the difference between supported employment and competitive employment. Competitive employment usually means that the employee eventually resumes all work functioning without any assistance or modification to the job. In supported employment, however, an employee resumes work only if appropriate support is provided. Examples of support include moving a desk to a distraction-free area, giving the employee a flexible start time, providing extra coaching to learn duties, or trading away problematic job tasks to another employee. This is an ongoing process, because whenever something changes, such as the employee's level of ability/disability, the demands of personal life, new work relationships, new duties or changes in health, an adjustment in support may be required.

Typically, the first thing the long-term disability company wants to know is whether you are competitively employable. Sometimes it is very clear to the doctor that his or her patient is not competitively employable and this may mean that disability benefits should be continued. When it is not clear whether you are competitively employable, it will be helpful if your physician bears in mind that a neuro-psychology assessment, job analysis and intervention from a brain injury specialist may all be necessary before this question can be answered. A supported work environment is typically a negotiated process with the long-term disability company to maintain ongoing partial or full benefits and support. As well, it requires the cooperation of an employer who is willing to make changes or accommodate cognitive or physical barriers to allow a return to work. Remember that the previous employer who knows you is most likely to be willing to make these changes. When completing your disability company form, your doctor should consider whether you are in a competitive position to find a new job with an unknown employer. If you are less competitive due to the need for significant accommodations, then probably you should be described as not competitive or in need of supported employment.

The efforts of several people, including yourself, your doctor, the long term disability carrier, a neuro-psychologist and a brain injury specialist may all be needed to help you get back to a productive paid work life. Cooperation between your physician and your disability insurance carrier to provide the types of interventions described, as well as your determined efforts, will enhance your chances of successfully returning to either competitive or supported work.

This article was inspired by a presentation by Dr. Jocelyn Lacroix, Neuro-psychologist, to the Neurosciences Grand Rounds at Vancouver Hospital and Health Sciences Centre.

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