



A CHANGING APPROACH TO RETURN TO WORK

Until recently in British Columbia, physicians' decisions about the return to work (RTW) of their patients were often limited — either the patient could return to full duty or they could not. Employers used to offer little in the way of modified return-to-work opportunities. Today there's a new approach. Many employers are initiating “remain at work” and RTW programs for injured employees. The most progressive programs allow physicians to use the RTW process as part of their treatment plan. In short, RTW becomes a form of therapy. The process ensures that physicians make medical decisions while employers make employment decisions.

WORK AS THERAPY

RTW programs are based on the philosophy that many patients can safely do some form of productive work during their recovery. In order for this approach to be effective, it's vital that the patients understand and have confidence in the “work as therapy” philosophy. You can help by counselling your patients on the benefits and expected results of the RTW plan. It's important that they understand that a work as therapy approach can benefit them physically, emotionally, and socially.

BENEFITS

The work as therapy approach benefits everyone.

- Employees benefit by recovering more rapidly and more completely.
- Employers benefit by being able to retain skilled employees.
- Physicians benefit by having access to a new therapeutic intervention — work as therapy — where in the past treatment options have been limited. (WorkSafeBC recognizes your participation in the RTW process by providing a fee for service.)

ATTENDING PHYSICIAN'S ROLE

You're the one who sets the patient's expectations about time-loss. As an attending physician, you're often asked to facilitate the remain-at-work process by providing RTW planning. You may also be asked to approve your patient's participation in proposed short-term, modified duties.

HOW TO FACILITATE THE RTW PROCESS

Communicate

Please help the patient (and his/her employer) understand when he/she can safely return to work, and under what conditions. When your patient cannot yet return to work, please explain to everyone involved why this is the case. It's also helpful to identify when (or if) you believe the worker's condition will improve sufficiently to allow the patient to participate in a RTW program.

Use work as an extension of medical treatment

Much like physical therapy or work conditioning, placing recovering patients into physically suitable work can help them maintain their physical conditioning. It can also have significant biopsychosocial benefits for the patient and help maintain the employee/employer relationship.

Establish timelines

Establishing a timeline sets an expectation of recovery times and assists the employer in developing a safe and productive RTW program for your patient. The two most important timelines are:

- The earliest date your patient can safely return to alternate modified duties
- The date your patient can safely resume his/her full duties

Focus on capabilities

An effective prescription for safe RTW is to focus on the individual's capabilities. Objective medical limitations should be restricted to only the anatomical area of injury. To safely assign work activities, a good description of the claim-related physical and/or psychological restrictions is required. It's important that your patient (and their employer) understand what work duties can and cannot be safely performed. Employers are much more likely to identify suitable work when they consider the patient's abilities rather than his or her restrictions.



RTW OR RETURN-TO-WHAT?

As an attending physician, you're not expected to identify tasks or design work duties for a RTW plan. That's a team effort that involves WorkSafeBC staff working with the employer, with your input. However, you can assist the team by initiating the question, "Return to what?" The "what" refers to appropriate job tasks based on your patient's capabilities, recommended physical activities, and medical restrictions. The RTW process allows physicians to make medical decisions and employers to make employment decisions.

WORKSAFEBC SUPPORTS YOUR EFFORTS

WorkSafeBC provides fee item #19950 "RTW Consultation" for you to facilitate a safe and early RTW for your patient. You can proceed with a RTW consultation following an injured worker's initial visit to your office by:

- Obtaining approval for the consultation process from a WorkSafeBC officer (please contact your local medical advisor)
- Discussing RTW with the employer
- Having a second office visit with your patient to discuss the RTW plan

The consultation and RTW plan must be documented and submitted on **Form II**.

RTW IS GOOD MEDICINE

WorkSafeBC understands that you consider the whole person when making your decision about whether your patient should return to work, when your patient should return to work, and under what conditions. In many cases, a modified RTW plan is consistent with the physical, emotional, and social well-being of your patient. The work as therapy philosophy gives attending physicians an effective treatment option. When it's appropriate for your patient, WorkSafeBC is ready to assist you in its implementation.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Visit our website at WorkSafeBC.com for more information.

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