

Historical Perspective: 1957

Clinical Aspects of Absenteeism, R.S.H 10, 1957, p.681

Paper by **Sir Walter Chiesman**, Treasury Medical Adviser,

“**Absenteeism is a much more complex problem**, mainly because, although disease initiates absence, the time taken to return to work is influenced by a multitude of social factors little to do with medicine, and the pathological diagnosis of the disease is often in doubt.”

“**Absence from work is an inaccurate measure of morbidity** – 90% of minor illness does not lead to incapacity. Absence often depends not on a particular disease process but on the **standard of health for work that the patient sets** – i.e. on the patient’s ability to adjust to the working environment.”

“**Dissatisfaction with working conditions** can often be counteracted by escape to outside interests, which unfortunately include ill-health and absence. ”

Determinants of Employment

- Employment is determined by the measurable effects of the condition, and also by the job and psycho-social factors.
- Coggon's research suggests that **much musculo-skeletal disability** attributed to occupational injury is due to **psychologically-mediated** response to the external trigger, conditioned by individual characteristics, cultural values, beliefs and expectations.
- Christensen et al explored longitudinally psychological, social and mechanical **work factors** as predictors of back pain severity (product of intensity and duration) ..
.... and the work factors predicted the back pain severity.

Predictors of back pain are not always 'medical'

After adjustment for age, sex, skill level, back pain severity and other potential confounders, the most consistent **predictors of back pain** were:

- **decision control at work**
(lowest OR 0.68;
99% confidence interval (CI): 0.49 -0.95),
- **empowering leadership at work**
(lowest OR 0.59; 99% CI: 0.38-0.91)
- **fair leadership at work**
(lowest OR 0.54; 99% CI: 0.34-0.87)



Christensen JO, Knardahl S. 2012

Do not forget leadership and other psycho-social factors

The painful workplace

Pain must be explored beyond the obvious ...

... as it may be, or be used as, a camouflage for :

- poor or bad work
- poor or bad workplaces
- poor leadership or management

i.e. **“the painful workplace”** .

If questions are not asked, the total story may never be told, and the person will be most unlikely to go back to work sustainably.

Good Employment : Essential characteristics

Good work

- **Stable and safe**
- **Individual control**
- **Fair work demands**

- **Flexible arrangements**
- **Opportunities** training, promotion
- **Promotes Health and Wellbeing**

- **Prevents** isolation, discrimination
- **Shares information**
- **Reintegrates** sick /disabled if possible

Good workplaces

- **Visible senior leadership**
- **Appropriately trained managers**

- **Integration of OHS** with health promotion and illness prevention
- **Monitoring & measurement**

- **Empowering employees** to care for their own health
- **Enabling staff engagement**