

Backgrounder for Press Release

The Ontario Summit to Prevent Work Disability is an initiative that embraces the 60 Summits model to improve the workplace disability management system in Ontario. The model is described in a report called “Preventing Needless Work Disability by Helping People Stay Employed” written in 2006 by a group of American and Canadian physicians and published by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM). The report makes 16 recommendations to shift the focus of compensation boards, insurance companies, employers, unions, lawyers, legislators and the medical community beyond managing illnesses and injuries after the fact, towards putting in place solutions to avoid or put a timely end to unnecessary work disability.

The 60 Summits project is a grassroots movement that seeks to create action groups in 50 American States and 10 Canadian provinces, to change the face of work disability in North America. The Ontario Summit event will gather together key stakeholder leaders to build an action plan that is feasible in and specific to Ontario.

Research tells us that:

- being at work contributes to a person’s recovery from illness and injury
- employment is a significant social determinant of health
- prolonged time off work decreases chances of a successful return to work
- people who are off work for more than one year have a 10% chance of returning to work of any kind
- many prolonged work absences begin with a minor illness or injury
- the employer cost of needlessly losing employees to work disability in Ontario is in the millions of dollars
- the increasing rates and cost of work disability in Ontario has a negative impact on Ontario’s economy

The problem with the current disability management system:

- it creates prolonged absence from work when in most cases a short absence is required
- it is made up of many different players who all have their own agendas, rules and regulations, processes, vocabulary and expertise that often work at cross-purposes
- it does not address the perspective of the employee, and ignores the impact of the psychological response to illness and injury
- the onus is often on the family physician to manage the medical aspects of the absence, without appropriate compensation and understanding of the workplace issues
- workplaces have rigid processes and ideas about creating work modifications for the returning employee

The 60 Summit model based on the ACOEM report gives a framework that:

- adopts a work disability prevention model
- addresses behavioural and circumstantial realities that create or prolong work disability
- acknowledges the powerful contribution that motivation makes to outcomes and suggests changes to improve incentives for people to return to work
- invests in system and infrastructure improvements

Some of the specific recommendations include:

- increasing awareness among all stakeholders of how rarely work disability is medically required
- addressing normal human reactions to illness or injury that when unaddressed contribute to prolonged absence
- addressing social and workplace realities that contribute to prolonged absence
- finding ways to address psychiatric conditions earlier and more effectively as they are increasing as the primary reason for people to go off work, and also often happen as a consequence of illness or injury
- supporting physicians through compensation and education, and by creating a system for patient advocacy to get physicians out of a loyalties bind
- increasing on-the-job recovery and flexibility in work modification programs and accommodation processes
- simplifying and standardizing information exchange methods between employers/insurers and medical offices
- devising better strategies to detect and deal with bad faith behaviour

To make this new model a reality, all the stakeholders have to be at the table to build an action plan that is doable in Ontario. The Ontario Summit to Prevent Work Disability will be a collaborative and interactive event that will build an action plan to end needless work disability in Ontario.

For further information, please see:

Ontario Summit webpage

<http://www.60summits.org/ON>

The ACOEM report “Preventing Needless Work Disability by Helping People Stay Employed”

<http://www.60summits.org/pdfs/Introduction-to-New-Work-Disability-Prevention-Paradigm.pdf>

A brief introduction to the report

<http://www.60summits.org/pdfs/Introduction-to-New-Work-Disability-Prevention-Paradigm.pdf>

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