

GPs unlikely to recommend alternative duties for injured workers

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An Australian first study has revealed GPs are unlikely to recommend injured workers take alternative duties.

Victorian General Practitioners (GPs) are more likely to order ill or injured workers stay away from work than recommend alternative duties, according to an Australian first study.

Published in the prestigious *Medical Journal of Australia* this week, the study examined more than 120,000 medical certificates provided to injured workers in Victoria from 2003 to 2010.

The study was a collaborative work undertaken by academics from the Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research (ISCRR) and Monash University's Department of Epidemiology and Preventative Medicine.

Chief Research Officer for ISCRR, Dr Alex Collie, said more than 70 per cent of initial medical certificates issued by GPs for injured workers instructed them to stay away from work. Fewer than a quarter recommended a return to work with modified duties.

"This has significant implications given the growing body of evidence showing work benefits health and that returning to work after injury or illness can in fact promote recovery," Dr Collie said.

"These days lost are also highly relevant to the growing debate around the productivity of our workforce and the viability of compensation schemes.

"We know that GPs play a front line role in returning injured workers to work as they are the first point of contact with the health care system and the main gatekeepers to works compensation and disability benefits."

The study is the first to assess sickness certification of injured and ill workers in Australia and the first study worldwide to assess certification by GPs in a population this large.

It also found GPs were more likely to issue unfit-for-work certificates for patients with [mental health conditions](#).

"Our results are consistent with studies in the UK which showed the highest proportion of unfit-for-work certificates were written for workers with mental [health conditions](#)," Dr Collie said.

Only four per cent of Victorian workers with mental health conditions received a certificate recommending a return to work with modified duties in this study.

"Workers with fractures, traumatic injuries, back pain and strains, musculoskeletal disorders and other diseases were more likely to receive certificates recommending a return to work than those with [mental health](#) conditions," Dr Collie said.

The study is part of a broader project examining the role of GPs in the return to work process and has undertaken in-depth qualitative interviews with GPs, injured workers, employers and compensation scheme representatives.

Lead researcher Professor Danielle Mazza, from Monash University, said the one-on-one interviews provided a detailed cross-section of viewpoints.

"The interviews explored the intricacies of the individuals' experience from their perspective and this will in turn facilitate understanding of the attitudes and practices of the various groups involved in returning an injured or ill worker to work," Professor Mazza said.

Provided by Monash University

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