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THE EXPERIENCES OF PHYSIOTHERAPISTS WITH WORK RELATED MUSCULOSKELETAL INJURY

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Although evidence suggests that physiotherapists experience WMSDs as a result of their work, there are disproportionately few who claim workers’ compensation in the Victorian health sector (Victorian WorkCover Authority, 1997). One in six physiotherapists move area of practice as a consequence of work related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSDs) (Cromie, Robertson, Best, in press).

In-depth interviews were used to explore the experiences of this previously uninvestigated group of physiotherapists who changed area of practice or left the profession because of injury. Eighteen participants, 15 female and three male, were interviewed. All but one was working in some capacity. The one participant who was studying, was doing so with the aim of changing her area of practice. Eight of the therapists were younger than thirty at the time of the initial onset of the WMSD that caused them to change their area of practice.

One of the dominant themes of the interviews related to the losses experiences by the participants as a consequence of their WMSD. These included financial losses, professional loss, loss of identity as a therapist and loss of quality of life. Participants also described how their WMSD compromised their ADL and function, their leisure and hobbies, their relationships and their enjoyment of life. They also spoke about their feelings associated with these losses, and with the experience of changing their area of practice. Participants who claimed workers’ compensation (six females), without exception spoke of their experiences of the workers’ compensation system in negative terms.

This presentation offers insights into their experiences. It is not intended to represent all injured therapists, rather to illuminate aspects of injury that are frequently not considered in the literature. For example, the majority opted to leave the workers’ compensation system and manage their own rehabilitation. Although managing their own rehabilitation was facilitated by their knowledge and skills acquired as practising therapists, this knowledge, and their status as professionals, did not afford them any advantage when managing their injury or negotiating the workers’ compensation system.

This video presentation illustrates the experiences of those therapists interviewed for this study. It uses their words but the voices of actors. The therapists discussed the direct and indirect losses they experienced as a consequence of injury, in the areas of work and their personal lives. They also discussed the impact their injuries had on them as employees and as co-workers, and the compromises they made in their leisure and daily lives to remain at work.

There is a need for therapists to recognise that a sizeable minority of their colleagues move their area of practice because of injury. This presentation raises previously undocumented issues affecting therapists who are forced to change their career direction because of injury. It also suggests areas for further research and ways in which the profession might expedite and ease the transition for injured therapists who are forced to move.
