



Institute of Actuaries of Australia

# XIth Accident Compensation Seminar 2007

## **Facilitators of and Barriers to Return to Work**

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## Acknowledgements

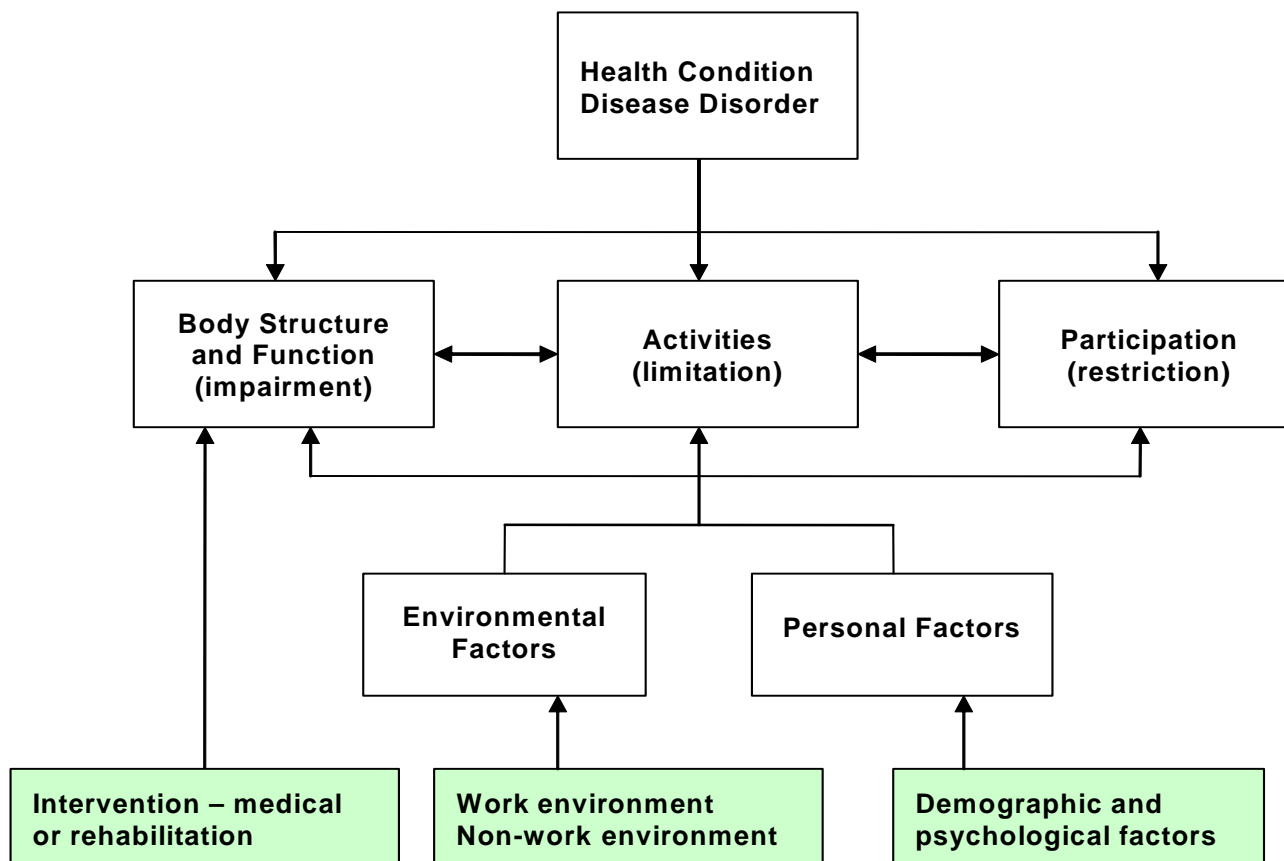
- The project team: Peter Foreman, Greg Murphy, Hal Swerissen, and research assistant support from the Australian Institute for Primary Care (Latrobe University)
- The research was sponsored by the South Australian WorkCover Corporation in association with the Trauma Recovery Accident Centre, South Australia.

## The task

To review the Australian and international research on return to work after injury in order to:

- 1 provide an overview of the facilitators of, and barriers to, return-to-work after injury, and,
- 2 identify implications of this work for future research

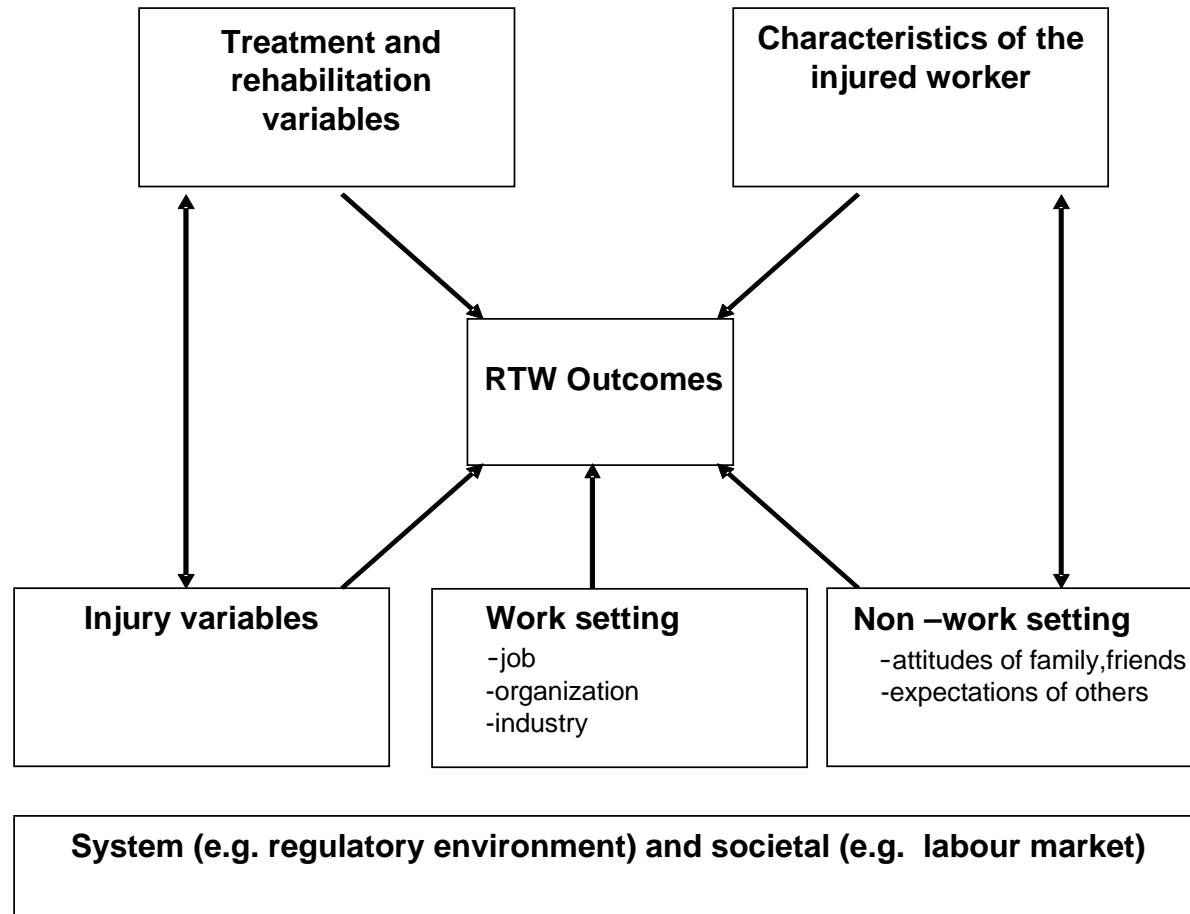
# A model of relevant constructs (adapted from ICF: WHO, 2001)



## Some points from the diagram

- The model suggests three groups of interventions that need to be available within the service system:
  - those addressing the condition or its sequelae;
  - those addressing environmental factors (both work and non-work environments); and
  - those that focus on malleable person-related factors

# Scope of the review: Possible determinants of RTW





## **Biopsychosocial factors influencing return to work post injury**

- The box at the bottom of the figure is important to remind us of the uniqueness of the Australian occupational rehabilitation system
- We can borrow much from overseas research but some system features are unique to Australia, and occasionally, to a particular local jurisdiction.

## What we did

- Stage 1 A comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant research since 1995. Resulted in 892 research articles
- Stage 2 Research that employed objective measure of RTW selected for further analysis
- Stage 3 Only articles that had minimum level of study complexity and design rigour were included in final set



## Characteristics of the research literature

- Extensive
- Involves many disciplines and perspectives

But:

- Lacks theoretical base
- Relatively few scientifically rigorous studies
- Rarely addresses the full range of factors

## Key findings – Medical and rehabilitation interventions

- Likely to be different risk factors and different interventions required at different stages post-injury. E.g.
  - Acute stage (first month)
  - Sub acute ( 2 to 3 months)
  - Chronic ( over 3 months)

If the above is true, then more longitudinal research is required.

## **Key findings – Medical and rehabilitation interventions (con't)**

For musculo-skeletal conditions: research support for the following:

- Continuing usual activities as normally as possible despite pain is associated with better outcomes than traditional medical treatment and rest and this also applies to work activities
- Early return: the longer the worker is off work with a musculoskeletal condition the lower their chances of ever returning to work

## **Key findings – Medical and rehabilitation interventions (con't)**

- Psychosocial factors such as workers' fears and beliefs about their conditions and the impact of re-entry to the work place on their health, and the promotion of self-responsibility and self-care are critical domains that need to be addressed in rehabilitation
- Communication, cooperation and establishing common agreed goals between the injured worker, health providers, supervisors and management are critical elements in effective return to work management

## Key findings -Workplace Factors

Much of the variability in return-to-work outcomes is accounted for by what takes place at the workplace. Factors associated with variation in RTW rates include:

- Contact between health care provider and workplace
- Work accommodation offers
- Early contact with the worker by the workplace, ergonomic site visits
- Presence of a return-to-work coordinator
- Support from supervisors and work colleagues



## Key findings - Organisational, Industry and System Factors

- Almost no studies of RTW outcomes of study participants from different WC systems
- The so-called Workplace Disability Management approach of Shrey, needs more fine-tuned evaluation so as to identify the effectiveness of various “components” of this package
- Within systems, the impact of variables such as organisational size and industry type needs to be evaluated for impact on RTW.

## Key findings - Individual Worker Characteristics

- Demographic (younger age, male gender, more pre-injury education and being married are all predictive of better return-to-work outcomes)
- The individual's cognitions and expectations, including initial levels of perceived functional disability, expectations about recovery, expectations about RTW, and confidence in ability to perform work-related activities, have been identified as important predictors of RTW outcome

## Key findings - Individual Worker Characteristics (con't)

- Emotions - psychological distress, negative attitudes or a diagnosable mental disorder associated with prolonged absence
- “Social support” needs to be assessed independent of the individual; and focused social support for RTW has been consistently associated with improved RTW rates.

## Limitations of existing research

- Lack of cross system studies: need for information about comparative system performance, especially in the case of common injuries
- Lack of studies which take into account the local context
- Thus, Australian cross-system studies are increasingly required.

## Limitations of existing research

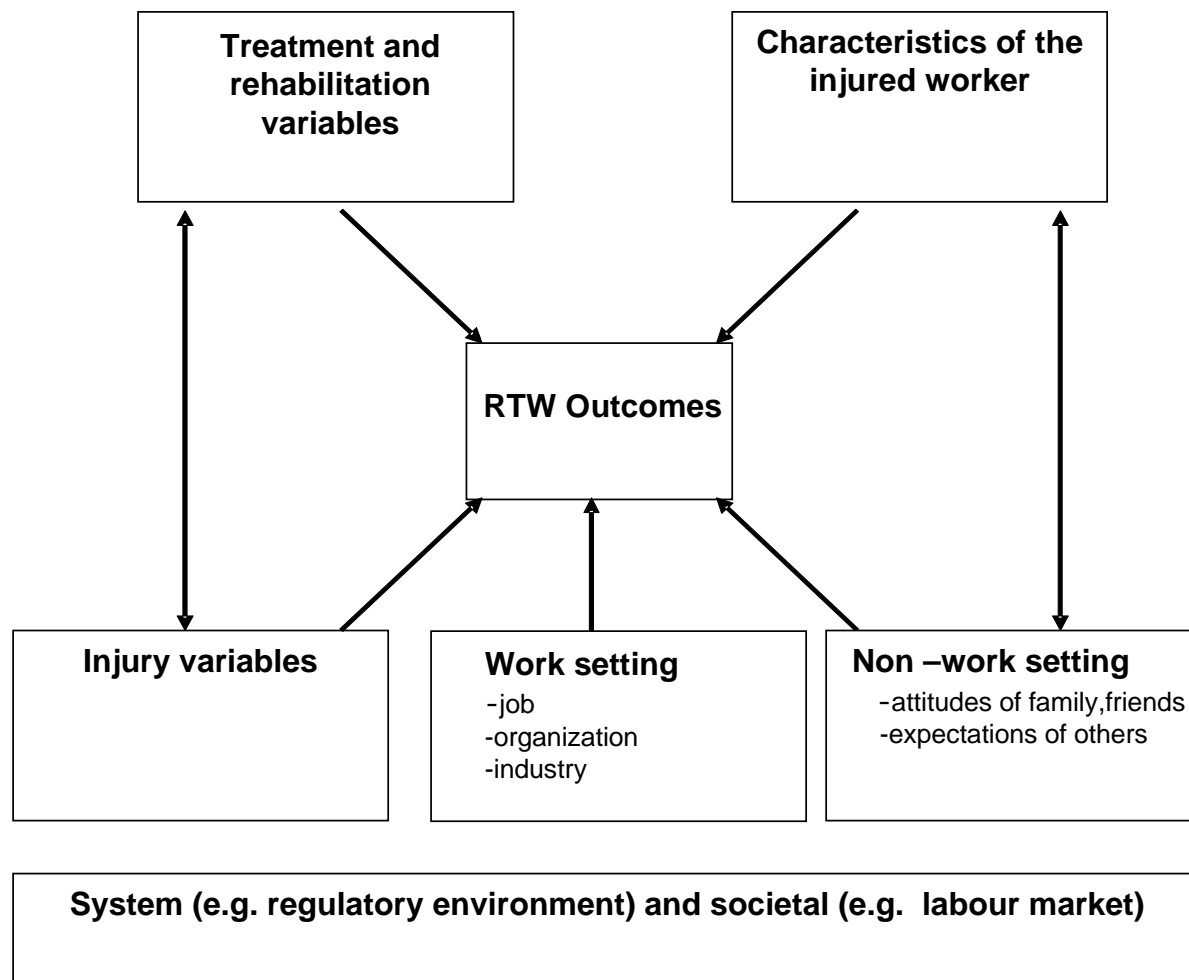
- Inadequate accounting for full range of factors likely to influence RTW outcomes (e.g. factors such organisational climate, supervisor support, or family support for various return-to-work behaviours typically not assessed)
- Need to pay more attention to stage of injury



## Future research

- What research is likely to be useful in informing system and practice development?
- General recommendations:
  - Studies whose measures go beyond assessments of injury and of individual attributes to include measures of selected, key workplace variables
  - Studies whose design and analysis enables one to assess the unique contribution of key workplace variables to study RTW outcomes.
  - Cross-system studies

# Range of determinants of RTW



## **Implications for managers of local research programs**

- Research involving clinicians
- Research involving Approved Rehabilitation Providers
- Research involving Employers

# Research priorities for the workers' compensation sector

- Measures
  - What needs to be better measured?
    - Client variables
    - Intervention characteristics
    - Employer characteristics
  - How could these be reliably measured in practice?
  - By whom?

## Research priorities for the workers' compensation sector

- Building enhanced coordination between key parties
  - Treating practitioner
  - Rehabilitation provider
  - Insurer
  - Employer
- How might improved coordination be achieved?
- Which partnerships should be a priority for enhancement?



## Research involving clinicians

- Useful to investigate the contribution to enhanced RTW outcomes arising from clinicians' communicating more effectively with workplace representatives.

## Research involving clinicians(cont.)

- Occupational Physicians are rarely included in RTW research projects:
  - Useful to investigate the contribution to enhanced RTW outcomes arising from early involvement of this group.
  - Useful to understand the impact on treating GPs of the early involvement of Occupational Physicians.

## Research involving clinicians(cont.)

- Research investigating the potential of LMOs to act as identifiers of “at risk” injured workers who would benefit from specialist early intervention (secondary prevention) programs or services.

## Research involving Approved Rehabilitation Providers

Qualitative studies, at two levels.

- Across the system (superior vs. inferior organisations)
- Within an organisation (superior vs. inferior performers)

## Research involving Employers

- Within a single *industry sector*, examination of organisational characteristics correlated with superior or inferior WC performance
- Within a single *self-insuring* organisation, examination of Departmental characteristics correlated with superior or inferior WC performance



## Implications for system administrators

- Building research capacity and knowledge base
  - Systematic collection of data across the range of variables that are known to influence RTW