

# CANCER SMART

May 2010 • Issue 7 • FREE



## SPECIAL EDITION: CANCER AND THE WORKPLACE

### RETURNING TO WORK AFTER CANCER

Written by Holly Bradley, *Managing Director, Wellspring Cancer Support Foundation*

Over the next five years, approximately **905,275<sup>1</sup>** Canadians will be diagnosed with cancer. About **516,000** of these Canadians will be between the ages of **20 AND 69**, a group typically considered the “working” age.

Although a precise figure for Canada is not known, the best indicator at the moment is that about **62%** of cancer patients will return to work following cancer treatment<sup>2</sup>. This means that about **320,000** Canadians will be returning to work after cancer treatment over the next five years alone.

### WHY IS RETURNING TO WORK SUCH AN IMPORTANT ISSUE?

There are a number of areas of concern shared by patients who are returning to work. They can impact directly on work performance, and increase the worry about returning to work.

#### COGNITIVE

“Brain Fog” is the common term used by patients to refer to changes in cognition (thinking) that can occur following cancer treatment. These can include, among others, decreased memory, reduced attention and concentration, problem finding words, and difficulty thinking through and solving problems.

#### PHYSICAL

Fatigue is the most frequently reported side-effect of all cancer patients. Also, some patients have reduced mobility due to surgery and may need their physical workspace adapted.

There is also the practical consideration of medical follow-up, and the need for time away from work for medical appointments.

The ability to maintain one’s health is also a common concern in the context of stressful or demanding work lives.

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# Tips for Working with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor from an Insurance Company

Written by Maureen Parkinson, *Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor, M. Ed., C.C.R.C.*



Research and counselling practice has shown that the earlier you plan for your return to work, the greater your chance of a successful rehabilitation back to your workplace. Minimizing your time off work once you have regained your health reduces the financial burden, the possible loss of job skills and other problems and anxieties associated with returning to work after a prolonged absence.

Yet, as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor in a cancer centre I am aware of the understandable concerns some patients have about speaking with insurance funded Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors/Consultants. Often a principle point of discussion is the patient's readiness to return to work. There is no doubt that insurers are assessing employment readiness, and this can include determining eligibility for continued benefits. As a patient, you may feel particularly vulnerable when these discussions take place.

The good news is that this kind of process is not unusual and that you are likely not being singled out. In fact, your experience with counselling and assessment can potentially be an opportunity to secure help toward a successful recovery and return to work. To that end, it is important to have a clear understanding of what vocational rehabilitation is, what its advantages are, and what steps you can take to derive its maximum benefits.

## WHAT IS VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION?

Vocational rehabilitation is a timely, individualized and collaborative approach that typically includes vocational assessment, planning and support with the aim of safely returning the patient to work as quickly and as cost-effectively as possible. A Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor looks at ways to reduce the impact of illness on return to work through rehabilitation to restore function (e.g., exercise, physiotherapy, or counselling), to enhance other skills or abilities you have that you can use to compensate for other functional losses or the modification of environmental conditions at the work place (e.g. workstation modifications, change in job times, duties, etc.). Interventions may vary from counselling, vocational assessment and planning to job readiness/skill development, job placement and case management.

Vocational rehabilitation services provided by insurance companies vary depending on the contract purchased by your employer. Depending on the plan, the vocational rehabilitation counsellor/consultant will assess whether you are able to return to your former job, a modified job, or, failing that, whether you are able to return to work in general. In many cases, graduated return to work with wage top-up is very helpful at this stage in addressing the fatigue and loss of conditioning that cancer patients commonly experience.

The initial aim of vocational rehabilitation is to return you to the same job with the same employer. This has the advantages of returning you to an environment you know, allows you to maintain seniority and benefits, and is often the easiest and most economical approach.

Typically, insurance Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors/Consultants will consider your return to work options in order, and will not consider the next option until fully ruling out all the previous ones.

Options range from returning directly to your old job to funding retraining for a new job, depending on the insurance contract and cost effectiveness. Here is a sample checklist:

- Can you return to your old job without assistance?
- Can your job with the same employer be modified?
- Can you move into another job at the same workplace?
- Can you transfer skills to another job?
- Can you find another job?
- Can you train for another job?

## ADVANTAGES OF WORKING WITH A VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELLOR

Here are some advantages of working with your counsellor and other professionals:

- They can be very helpful in negotiating return to work accommodations with employers.
- They can educate the employer of any obligations they may have for workplace accommodation under existing and applicable provisions in the law for human rights.
- They can help come up with a return to work plan, such as graduated return to work, and recommend and explore opportunities to modify the work environment to facilitate your return.
- They can be helpful to employees and employers by providing information on ways a job might be modified.
- In some cases, Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors can secure funding for experts and services, such as ergonomic specialists, physiotherapists, kinesiologists, occupational therapists, personal trainers, and other exercise specialists or counsellors who can assess and provide innovative solutions to problems that may be impeding a return to work.

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## STEPS TO TAKE FOR GETTING THE MAXIMUM BENEFIT FROM COUNSELLING

What steps can you take to work effectively with insurance Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors to get the best results and avoid unnecessary challenges? Your first steps are to anticipate and plan for your return to work:

- With your Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor/Consultant, discuss the perceived barriers to your return to work and ideas for how they can be overcome.
- Discuss your work readiness on an ongoing basis with your doctor.
- Ask your doctor whether there is anything you can do to help promote your work readiness.
- With your doctor, explore whether there is useful rehabilitation available to restore functions that may have been affected by cancer or its treatment.

Maintaining an ongoing dialogue with your doctor(s) about your work readiness will ensure that you will not be caught off guard if your eligibility for benefits changes. Insurance representative usually solicit your doctor's opinion on your work readiness, so it is important to know just what your doctor is thinking.

Your next steps are to discuss with your Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor how your insurance works:

- What are the conditions of your benefits and their definition of disability?
- Does the definition of qualification change at some point?
- Are there provisions for wage top up if you attempt a graduated return to work? If so, for how much and for how long?
- If you do a graduated return to work with a wage top up, how many hours of work do you do when the benefit ends?
- Is there funding available for useful rehabilitation services not covered by the standard health care system?\*
- Are there provisions for training if you cannot return to your old job?

Most importantly, try to take control of your vocational rehabilitation and come up with your own plan with the aid of your Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor. Be aware that your plan needs to fit inside the parameters of vocational rehabilitation services offered for those services to be of help. Be realistic about your expectations of a vocational rehabilitation plan, and be aware there are limits to what the insurance company considers as cost-effective within the confines of the insurance contract. Finally, the more informed you are about the way things work the greater is your potential for success.

*Maureen Parkinson has worked for over 15 years as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellor at the B.C. Cancer Agency. Previously, she worked as a vocational rehabilitation counsellor at the G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Hospital and in the private sector; and has worked as an instructor/facilitator for two career exploration programs funded by Service Canada. She has a Masters in Counselling Psychology and is a Canadian Certified Rehabilitation Counsellor. She is written articles on return to work featured on the BC Cancer Agency website. ■*

\* On this point, I have successfully advocated for exercise rehabilitation, neuropsychology and additional counselling. The funding is by no means automatic, but if there is a chance that such services can help you return to work faster it can be cost effective, and so in the interests of the insurance company to cover.

# Making a Successful 6 THINGS YOU

Written by Pamela Bowes, Money Matters Program

## KNOW YOUR EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

It is quite important for a cancer patient to know the legal rights and protections pertaining to the workplace when planning a return to work. There are two main legal provisions pertaining to the workplace.

The first is Human Rights related to having an illness or disability that addresses the responsibility of employers to accommodate an employee's disability-related needs at their job. Cancer and the associated limitations are considered disabilities. Each province has its own Human Rights code. There is also a federal Human Rights Act for federal employees.

The second provision is the Employment Standards Act which guides employers and employees on matters of termination, severance, vacation time and other employment matters. Each province has its own Act.

In addition, a unionized work environment will also have specific rules and information related to working in that company.

## KNOW THE RULES IN YOUR PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT

Most employers will have a Personnel Code or similar document that describes specific workplace policies. Issues addressed may include hours of work, sick time, personal days, time away from work to attend medical appointments, employee performance appraisals, managing challenges in the workplace, organizational structures, etc. Become familiar with your workplace's personnel code, particularly with the sections that pertain to leaves of absences, sick benefits, or practices pertaining to return to work.

## LIVE THE LIFE OF WORK

Many people forget just how demanding and tiring work can be when they have been away from it. Prior to returning, take

# Making a Successful Return to Work:

## 6 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Pamela Bowes, *Money Matters Program Manager*

a few weeks and live your life as if you are back at work – get up at the required time, dress in work clothes, take transportation or drive, and do tasks that resemble your job. Fit other regular activities – shopping, laundry, exercise, etc. – into your non-work hours. This will help to give you a realistic idea as to whether you have fully regained the capacity to work, have partial capacity, or if you still need more time to recuperate and build your capacities before considering a return. Be patient with yourself; first determine how much you are presently able to do, and then develop realistic goals to help you work up to your maximum abilities.

### SPEAK WITH YOUR PHYSICIAN

It is very important for a cancer patient to get their physician's opinion about preparing for a return to work. The physician can give you some valuable suggestions, including what work duties might need to be modified, reduced or eliminated. He or she might be needed in the future to provide written updates to the employer or insurance company on your progress and abilities, so it is important for your physician to be kept up-to-date.

### MAKE A RETURN-TO-WORK PLAN

Some things for you to consider when devising your plan include:

- Professional resources - Physiotherapists and occupational therapists may be able to help with building your work tolerance. These professionals might be available through your hospital, home care services, family doctor or insurance company. Vocational counsellors through your insurance company can help you examine your job, your abilities, limitations, your needs to make a successful return and develop a return to work plan. Other professionals at your workplace include human

resources staff, union leaders, and occupational health nurses.

- Paperwork - Is there paperwork that needs to be completed for your return? When, and to whom, does it need to be submitted, and can the paperwork be started now? Both you and your doctor will likely be asked to provide information about any limitations you might have upon your return.
- Personal business - It may be helpful to complete any matters of personal business, such as banking, income tax or elective medical/dental appointments, before you return to work. You might be better able to concentrate on your work without unnecessary distractions.

### REVIEW YOUR FINANCIAL SOURCES OF INCOME

If you have been living on a disability-related pension, such as long term disability, the Canada Pension Plan or a provincial disability program, you will want to become familiar with its return to work policy and how your income may be adjusted as you make the return. Key points to consider include:

- You will need to contact the income provider (e.g., insurance provider or CPP office) when you are thinking of returning, when you have returned, or when you have met a specific requirement (e.g. worked a certain length of time or have earned a certain amount of money). The income provider will want to review your capacity to work and your employment earnings, and make any adjustments to the insurance or disability pension that you are receiving.
- To ensure your income stays consistent while you undertake a gradual return to work, will the insurance income provider or

disability pension “top up” your income to the same amount you were receiving when you were not working? If yes, what is the process for documenting your earnings?

- Does the income provider have provisions for work trials, gradual work returns or going back onto the disability income if you are not well enough? What resources and supports, including financial, are in place if you cannot keep up and have to leave work?

### OTHER HELPFUL TIPS

- Work cooperatively with your professionals and try to keep the lines of communication open.
- Contact Wellspring to register for the Return to Work program, or consider registering for the Back at Work program if you are already back at your job. ■

### RETURN TO WORK

The Return to Work program is an educational and support program that addresses the concerns of individuals considering returning to work. Some of the topics that will be covered include managing the feelings about returning to work, managing health and personal information at work, and information on government benefits and the legal rights and responsibilities of both employers and employees.

### BACK AT WORK

A group program for members who have returned to work following their cancer diagnosis and treatment, that will help address the barriers and challenges members experience with being back at work. This is an eight week program held one evening per week.

# SPECIAL EDITION: CANCER AND THE WORKPLACE

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**“My priorities have changed. I don’t want to work as much as I used to.”**

**“Will I remember how to do my job?”**

**“I have no energy. I won’t be able to make it through the day.”**

**“My job is stressful. How will I take care of myself properly?”**

**“Who will hire a cancer patient? Do I tell possible employers that I have had cancer? Do I have to tell them?”**

## EMOTIONAL

Cancer is a life-transforming experience, and patients may find themselves re-evaluating the place and meaning of work in their lives. Some are eager to return to full hours and/or duties, while others wish to spend less time working, and re-negotiate hours or employers’ expectations of performance. Some do not wish to return to work at all, but must consider the economic reality of this choice. Others may choose a completely new career path.

For some patients the emotional “roller coaster” that started at diagnosis continues after treatment is over. Fear, anxiety or depression may still be part of their emotional experience, which has to be understood, and managed, in the context of the workplace.

## FINANCES

Time away from work for cancer treatment can have a serious financial impact, even for patients who received income from employer- or government-based programs. Many patients are compelled to return to work quickly for financial reasons alone, before they feel emotionally or physically ready.

## EMPLOYMENT SECURITY

This is probably the #1 issue addressed in the context of Wellspring’s workplace programming. Patients with jobs ask: “*Can I be fired or laid-off for having cancer?*” Patients without jobs ask “*Can employers refuse to hire me because I have had cancer?*” The answers to these questions can be complicated and are related to employment laws and human rights.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Fortunately, there are a number of ways that workplace concerns can be addressed, and that is the point of this special edition of CancerSmart.

There are many kinds of strategies – exercise, cognitive coping skills, nutrition programs, employment supports, and more – that can address specific concerns that patients have, and can impact positively on a successful return to work.

Keep in mind, too, that many employers genuinely care about their employees, and want to help. In addition, employee absenteeism costs money – direct costs such as short- or long-term disability payments, or indirect costs such as temporary job replacement. It is often also in the best interests of the employer to engage in a well-planned and thoughtful approach to welcoming patients back into the workforce. ■

Wellspring’s specialized *Return to Work* program is available at all centres. Whether you have been to Wellspring many times before, or would be coming for the first time, this program may help. For more information, or to register, see the back page for the Wellspring centre nearest you.

### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Cancer Society, *Canadian Cancer Statistics, 2009*

<sup>2</sup> Spelten, Sprangers and Verbeek (2002) *Return to Work of cancer survivors: A literature review. Psychooncology. 2002 11(2):124–131.*



# Exercise Can Improve Your Workplace Performance

Written by Claire Langevine, *Program Coordinator*. Contribution from Manesha Khazanchi, *Bsc. Certified Kinesiologist*



One of the biggest fears that you may face when planning your return to work is being able to perform your duties at the same levels as before your diagnosis. This concern might stem from many factors, including physical fatigue or “brain fog”, which is a term used to describe cognitive deficits that patients can experience after cancer treatment. These deficits can include memory loss, difficulties with concentration or finding words, and problem solving.

Exercise has been shown to be very helpful as a return-to-work strategy. Regular exercise can lead to health benefits that can actually improve your work performance and physical comfort. Exercise programs that combine both cardiovascular activity and strength training produce the greatest benefits<sup>1</sup>. It is important to exercise for at least 30 minutes in one session. Some of the benefits of exercise include:

## INCREASED OVERALL STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE

Being physically fit can reduce symptoms of fatigue, improve your appetite, and enhance endurance. Developing strong upper and lower back muscles and a strong core will help you with the physical demands of your work.

## BETTER SLEEP

When performed at the right time, exercise can help to regulate your sleep patterns. This leads to improved alertness and workplace productivity during the day.

## IMPROVED CONCENTRATION

During exercise, maintaining proper posture and following appropriate movement patterns stimulates the use of your memory and other cognitive processes. Walking is also very good for your brain, because it increases blood circulation and the oxygen and glucose that reach your brain<sup>2</sup>. This increase also enhances cellular energy production and waste removal<sup>2</sup>. Running has been shown to cause positive improvements to the hippocampus, an area of the brain linked to learning and memory<sup>2</sup>.

## INCREASED EXECUTIVE



## FUNCTIONING

Physical exercise has also been shown to improve cognitive functioning in adults without cancer, and researchers are currently looking at the effects of exercise on cognitive functioning in cancer patients<sup>3</sup>. Studies have shown that regular exercise has benefits for memory and executive functioning; that is, functions that involve planning, organization, and the ability to mentally balance different intellectual tasks at the same time.

## IMPROVED MOOD

Studies have also shown that exercise, performed for 30 minutes three times per week, can reduce depression and improve overall mood<sup>2,4</sup>.

## WORKPLACE PROGRAMS



Wellspring offers a number of programs that can impact on both workplace re-entry and performance. Return to Work addresses overall readiness, communication with employers, and identification of performance concerns. A customized Cancer Exercise program can help with physical or cognitive deficits impacting performance, and “Brain Fog”, a cognitive rehabilitation program of Maximum Capacity, teaches strategies for enhancing cognitive functions. For more information, please contact your closest centre or visit [www.wellspring.ca](http://www.wellspring.ca) ■

### Sources

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- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/exercise.html#physicalexercise>
- <sup>3</sup> [http://www.aicr.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=14005&news\\_iv\\_ctrl=0&abbr=res\\_](http://www.aicr.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=14005&news_iv_ctrl=0&abbr=res_)
- <sup>4</sup> [http://journals.lww.com/acsm-msse/Fulltext/2009/05001/Mood\\_Enhancement\\_Persists\\_For\\_Up\\_To\\_12\\_Hours.1720.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/acsm-msse/Fulltext/2009/05001/Mood_Enhancement_Persists_For_Up_To_12_Hours.1720.aspx)

# FRANCINE'S STORY

Written by Francine Johnston



I am a self-employed business woman who has orchestrated international projects and conferences worldwide. I love my work. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I did not expect to face so many challenges, including its impact on my career.

I was diagnosed with cancer in October 2006. The tumor was located inside the bone of the lower front jawbone. For approximately a year before my diagnosis, the dental specialist thought it was a bone cyst and wasn't worried. I had a few surgeries to correct this, but it wasn't healing. After a deeper biopsy was done, a rare form of cancer was confirmed. Two weeks later, I was having a 10-hour surgery.

My surgery involved a tracheotomy and a neck incision from ear to ear to get access to the tumor. They removed part of my jawbone, floor of my mouth, nine lower teeth and two dozen lymph nodes. The nerve and muscle in my lower jaw were cut and I have lost the feeling of my lower lip and chin.

The reconstruction was done by taking the fibula bone in my leg and shaping it to form my jaw bone. It was held in place with a titanium plate attached to the remaining mandible on both sides. Arteries and veins were reconnected. The skin from my leg was used to form the floor of my mouth. This new skin was attached under my tongue as a flap which allowed me to talk, swallow and eat.

The surgery was extremely difficult. Physically, I was so swollen and I could barely recognize myself in the mirror. Psychologically, I felt I had lost my identity.

My recovery was slow and painful. I encountered many challenges and difficulties and had to learn new ways to enable myself to function again. The long wound on my leg made walking and using stairs very strenuous. The lack of feeling in my lower lip made eating or drinking a major challenge, often with spills all over me. Even the simple task of drinking water would trigger swelling of my skin graft in my mouth and make my speech unclear. And, because the muscle and nerve in my chin were cut, my lower lip pulls in and I sound different.

Before cancer, I used to joke that I couldn't even go out in public without makeup on, and now I had to face the world with a damaged off-centered jaw line, swollen face and missing teeth. There were so many stares and people turning away. I felt so lost and alone. At times, I felt it would have been easier to die on the operating table rather than going through such a painful experience. However, I chose to keep fighting. I hoped to get back into life fully, including my working life.

For several months I was unable to perform many of my job responsibilities, which is worrisome for someone who is self-employed. I didn't want to let my clients down. Fortunately, I had friends who chipped in when I was too physically and emotionally exhausted to work. After a couple of months of recuperation at home and hiding behind my computer screen, I was back doing parts of my work. Being self-employed meant that I didn't qualify for government programs, and all my bills still needed to be paid. I had to work.

The hardest part of my return to work journey was the "on site" project management at events. I had to travel, sometimes to other countries. I couldn't eat regular food and I had a constant dry mouth that impacted my ability to speak. My neck didn't move very well, I had scars, and my leg

ached after any physical activity. I stood out when I just wanted to blend in.

I had fatigue for a long time and struggled to keep up. It took well over a year for me to fully regain my strength and be back working to my full abilities.

The emotional impact of cancer was huge as it changed my facial appearance. I needed to get back to "normal" emotionally. I needed to be part of living again. I needed to contribute, to give back as I was given. I had tremendous support during my journey and it was time for me to give back to others.



I'm back at work full time and loving my life more than ever before. My life is very different now. I am a different person and happy to be me.

My message to other cancer patients who are struggling with returning to work is not to be afraid of what lies ahead. Confront your fears and push forward. I have endured many experiences that challenged me to the core, upon which I can now look back with pride.

My other message would be to use the resources that are available to you. I will always be grateful for the supportive services I accessed along my journey. When the world turned away from me because of how I looked as a result of cancer, the support network I developed welcomed me with open arms.

I've been asked if I wished I never had cancer. My response is that I wouldn't go back to who I was before. I have grown tremendously as a person, I've developed new friendships, and have had my longtime friends rally behind me. And I've returned to a job that I love. I wouldn't go back, not anymore. ■



A Lifeline to Cancer Support

LIVING WITH CANCER

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**WELLSPRING AT  
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Room 148 (off main lobby),  
76 Grenville Street  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1B2  
416.323.6400 ext. 4240

**WELLSPRING LONDON AND REGION**

231 Hyman Street  
London, Ontario N6A 1N6  
519.438.7379

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Stevensville, Ontario L0S 1S0  
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## CANCERSMART

May 2010 • Issue 7

CANCERSMART is published three times a year as an educational service of the Wellspring Cancer Support Foundation, under the auspices of its Program Committee: Kathryn Lennox (Chair), Mary Brown, Yvette Matyas, Harvey Nelson, Dr. Yasmin Rahim, Dr. Sheila Tervit, and Magdalene Winterhoff.

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