

Opening doors to information for injured workers through knowledge exchange and research with consumer community groups

Lynn Shaw, Melissa Knott, Rob Lindsay, Phil Brake, Peter Page, Colin Argyle, Joy MacDermid and Anita Kothari

Challenges for injured workers in accessing and using knowledge

Accessing and using knowledge is critical for injured workers to become informed about their health status, rights, and accountabilities in return-to-functioning and return-to-work. However, the information that injured workers need to: make decisions about their injury; understand their responsibilities for reporting and documentation; maneuver the claims management process; and interact with health care professionals in the recovery and return to work processes, is often new and complex. For most, it is a very daunting experience to try and find information on this full spectrum of issues, let alone understand or apply relevant information to help them through their experience. As therapists we become a primary point of access for information and knowledge that injured workers draw upon as they attempt to navigate the informational labyrinth in the return-to-work system. To promote injured worker participation in the return-to-work care processes, therapists are spending time with clients by assisting them in finding, sorting and appraising information, helping injured workers find out what they need to know about return-to-work from the employer and insurance company and helping them manage the future consequences of residual disability. Beyond the therapist-worker dyad, injured workers also desire information that can help them quickly gain an understanding of the claims management process and the

About the authors –

Lynn Shaw, PhD., OT Reg. (Ont.), Assistant Professor, School of Occupational Therapy, University of Western Ontario, can be reached at leshaw@uwo.ca

Melissa Knott, MSc (OT) Candidate, School of Occupational Therapy, The University of Western Ontario

Rob Lindsay, President, Canadian Injured Workers Alliance

Phil Brake, National Coordinator, Canadian Injured Workers Alliance

Peter Page, President, Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups

Colin Argyle, Ontario Federation of Labour OFL Occupational Disability Response Team Services and Promotions Coordinator

Joy MacDermid, PhD., McMaster University

Anita Kothari, PhD., The University of Western Ontario

relevance of actions required to sustain a source of income while off work and to resume timely employment. Most important to injured workers is the need

for a place and space to interpret the information they acquire, and further, to make sense of the emotional and social upheaval they and their family experience with the barriers and challenges encountered in the return to work system.

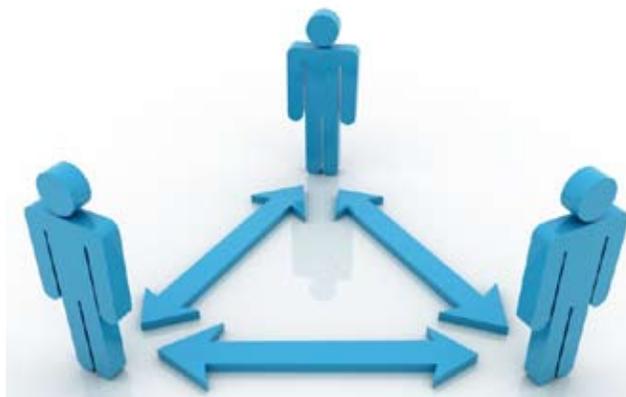
Therapists as knowledge brokers

A knowledge broker is understood to be a professional in the health care sector that turns research into policy or practice. Knowledge brokers are typically situated between the producers of knowledge and the users of knowledge (Lyons et al, 2006). For therapists the realm of knowledge needed to assist injured workers and to help them access the information they need has expanded beyond research-informed clinical advice to include policy information, insurance system information, procedural information, workplace information, counsel about the rights and responsibilities of workers and employers in the process as well as knowledge about available community resources and agencies.

Therapists are, in a sense, becoming knowledge brokers, that help injured workers become effective knowledge users. However, therapists for the most part have limited understanding of knowledge brokers, outside the health care sector, that injured workers can use in the return-to-work process. For instance, other knowledge brokers that injured workers turn to, to fill the void of information and difficulties interpreting information, are injured worker groups (IWGs).

Injured worker groups as knowledge brokers

In the community, IWGs help injured workers find the



information they need and also offer suggestions and direction about information they need to know based upon the experiential and policy knowledge gained through the efforts of IWGs over time. In effect, IWGs are primarily knowledge brokers of policy, legislation, procedural, benefit, and community resources and to a lesser extent, research. IWGs have developed many informal and formal peer support groups and networks of credible sources of information, people, and agencies that can help injured workers in times of occupational disruption and need. For the most part, injured workers groups receive little or no government funding; some groups are funded through labour or donations, and some primarily operate on the commitment of volunteers who have developed a life passion for activism that often emerges through experience in dealing with system inequities and injustices. In Canada, there are structured and informal groups in the community that offer a variety of supports for injured workers. These groups provide information on basic needs, such as temporary financing and food banks, claims and benefits information, advocacy services, networks with other groups, transformation supports and so on (Shaw et al., 2007).

Across Canada there are, however, inequities in access that injured workers have to IWGs, not only due to lack of funding, but also due to burnout, as many

persons who support and run groups have chronic disabilities. Despite these barriers, many IWGs are seeking opportunities to network with others and establish communities of practice that can be more effective in meeting the informational needs of injured workers. More educational efforts are needed to help therapists become aware of the support that IWGs can offer to improve access and use of knowledge by the end-users -- injured workers.

Opportunities to promote access and use of information

One step that might assist therapists in helping injured workers access information through community groups is for therapists to become more aware of the role of IWGs and to establish formal or informal collaborations or networks with these groups. Stakeholders, therapists and IWGs share the same goal: to support injured workers in accessing and using the right information at the right time. To assist therapists in understanding the services offered to injured workers, examples of the IWGs that exist in some areas of Canada and their roles in supporting knowledge exchange are outlined in Table One. This list is not inclusive, for further information on groups contact the Canadian Injured Workers Alliance website (see below).

Table One. Examples of Injured Workers Groups in Canada that provide information and supports to injured workers.

Name of Group and contact Information	Purpose and informational services offered
Canadian Injured Worker Alliance (CIWA) Website: www.ciwa.ca Contact: Phil Brake, National Coordinator 853 Hudson Drive, Labrador City, NL A2V 1M6 Ph: 1-709-944-5181 Em: philbrakeciwa@crrstv.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports and strengthens the work of injured workers' groups, provides training & education, produces & distributes resources, and provides a forum for exchanging information and experiences. • Information dissemination on matters affecting Injured and Disabled Workers. • Provide resources to Injured and Disabled Individuals and Representative Groups and enhance their ability to meet their needs, overcome barriers, keep abreast of developments affecting them and improve access to services. • Injured and Disabled Workers needs are met through the participative actions of CIWA representatives and their efforts to establish better understanding of the gaps between public policy and the provision of and access to services. Our efforts support the adoption of organizational resolutions in support of Injured and Disabled Workers and the advancement of social policy in this area.
Labrador West Injured & Disabled Workers Group Contact: Clive Hamilton, Director Ph 709-2882-4007 Em: clivehami@gmail.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Peer Support and some advocacy for and on behalf of injured and disabled persons. • Gather and share information from and between other similar groups, the Canadian Injured Workers Alliance, Labour and Local Union Councils as well as at regular public and board meetings.

Name of Group and contact Information	Purpose and informational services offered
Western Injured Workers Society Robert J. Lindsay, Director Ph: 306-545-6234 Em: roblind@sasktel.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Peer Support and some limited advocacy for and on behalf of injured and disabled persons. • Gather and share information between other similar groups, the Canadian Injured Workers Alliance, Labour and Local Union Councils as well as at regular public and board meetings.
OFL Ontario Federation of Labour Contact: Colin J. Argyle OFL Occupational Disability Response Team Services and Promotions Coordinator 1-800-668-9138 Em: cargyle@ofl.ca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides province wide workplace insurance and return to work training from introductory to advanced programs” contact information would be
ONIWG Ontario Network of Injured Workers Groups Contact: Peter Page President Em: info@oniwg.on.ca Website: http://www.oniwg.on.ca	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes the rights of workers who have been injured or have disabilities in Ontario. • Serves workers who have been injured or have disabilities • Dedicated to helping the injured and disabled and their families past, present and future, obtain their rights to Justice, Dignity, Equality, Health and safety and Security. • Unite people and organizations that are democratically governed by their membership. • Work toward the establishment a fair and just system of compensation. • Invite the co-operation of all persons who are dedicated to the abolition of injustice and exploitation of all those injured or disabled in the Province of Ontario.

Partnering in research with IWGs

The other opportunity that can support more effective access to information and use of knowledge is through the establishment of research partnerships with IWGs. Recently, Whalley-Hammell (2007) challenged occupational therapists to reflect on opportunities to include our clients, which include IWGs, in the research process to realize more authentic partnerships that can empower change. Findings from the research partnership between the Canadian Injured Workers Alliance (www.ciwa.ca) and the first author of this paper underscore that the lack of access to the right information at the right time is a pervasive problem for injured workers across Canada (Shaw et al., 2009).

Lack of access to knowledge is further compounded by the lack of awareness of the processes that can support optimal knowledge transfer and translation by IWGs and health care professionals. These findings lend support for more collaboration with community groups to share opportunities, draw upon each other's strengths, promote knowledge use by injured workers and to continue to nurture partnerships to support research needs in the area of knowledge transfer. This partnership is only the beginning of what is needed to work together to address system barriers, inform policy and to mobilize knowledge that can empower injured workers in becoming effective knowledge users in return

to work. For further information about the results of the study findings please contact the first author.

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