



Exploring Canadian Career Firefighters' Understanding of the Return-to-Work Process after Musculoskeletal Injuries

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Firefighters perform dangerous and physically demanding work, increasing their risk of musculoskeletal injuries that can lead to work absences. Return-to-work procedures can help firefighters return-to-work. The purpose was to explore what firefighters understand about return-to-work procedures in their workplaces, and what firefighters believe the facilitators and barriers to return-to-work are.

METHODS: Thirty-eight Canadian career firefighters were recruited for semi-structured interviews. Qualitative description methods were used to analyze the transcripts. Two researchers performed the inductive coding and thematic analysis.

RESULTS: Five themes were identified: 1. Variation in the return-to-work process knowledge among firefighters; 2. Accessible medical resources and treatments for the recovery of an injury; 3. Modified work must be meaningful and suitable; 4. Pressures to return-to-work too soon can lead to negative consequences; 5. Heavy physical demands of firefighting can make it more difficult to return-to-work. There was a variation in the experiences and understanding of return-to-work, as some firefighters were unaware of return-to-work procedures in their departments, while others had been through the return-to-work process for injuries they had sustained. Many reported facilitators for return-to-work were also reported as barriers in different contexts. For example, the availability of modified work allowed firefighters to return-to-work sooner and was seen as a facilitator by many firefighters, whereas some firefighters believed that the modified work lacked meaning, was not suitable, and acted as a barrier to returning to firefighting duties.

CONCLUSION: There is a lack of knowledge of the return-to-work processes; thus, firefighters should have access to clear return-to-work policies and procedures. Firefighters require treatments that are targeted to firefighting duties to help recover from injuries and regain functional physical abilities after an injury. Firefighters must be fully recovered, as returning to work too soon due to personal and workplace pressures can lead to re-injury or injuries to others.

Keywords: *Return-to-work, firefighters, musculoskeletal injuries, workplace injuries*

Presented: April 29th, 2022