

Promoting Healthy Work for Employees with Chronic Illness – Public Health and Work

Chronic illnesses such as depression, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, HIV or cancer are becoming increasingly more frequent and pose an individual, corporate and social burden. They reduce the quality of life of those affected, lower the economic output, increase the social and health issues, and often lead to early retirement.

Facts

The Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC 2008) reports that about 24 percent of the working age population (EU-27) suffer from at least one chronic health restriction.

The proportion of chronic diseases in the total disease occurrence is estimated at 77 percent within European countries.

Even though different actions have been launched and legislative initiatives have been adopted within European countries over the past years, still far too many people permanently drop out of the work process due to chronic health issues.

Tackling Chronic Diseases – A Win-Win-Win Situation

Help for people with chronic disease often means making it possible for those affected to continue their work. Individuals, the company itself and society as a whole profit from that help, since jobs for people with chronic disease ...

- ... secure social inclusion and social participation,
- ... reduce the individual risk of poverty and help diminish the further intensification of social inequality,
- ... reduce the pressure on companies associated with the shortage of skilled labour,
- ... position the company as an employer which perceives its social responsibility,
- ... reduce social and health spending,
- ... weaken the consequences and implications of demographic change.

The 9th Initiative by the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion

“Promoting Healthy Work for Employees with Chronic Illness – Public Health and Work (PH Work)” is the 9th initiative by the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion (ENWHP). Using the slogan “Work. Adapted for all. Move Europe”, the initiative focuses on the promotion of healthy, suitable work for those suffering the consequences of a chronic illness – either through enabling job retention or by supporting their return to work (RTW). Data on existing sustainable work strategies, policies and good practices with regard to workers with chronic conditions were collected in 17 European countries. Based on this information, a European Guide to Good Practice for employers and a set of policy recommendations were created.

The key recommendations by the ENWHP on how to promote healthy work for chronically ill employees are listed below.

For more information on the recommendations at national and European policy level, read our recommendation paper: “Recommendations from ENWHP’s ninth initiative”, published by ENWHP, March 2013.

Recommendations

#1: Focus on the prevention of chronic diseases in the workplace

Prevention is better than cure. This is true due to the long duration of the disease and the associated costs for the health and social system.

#2: Detect chronic diseases at an early stage

The earlier a disease is detected, the greater are the chances that the disease and its course may not become too serious. Therefore it is important to raise awareness, knowledge and competences of all relevant players.

#3: The perspective should move from reduced performance to remaining working ability

Chronic diseases are not only an economic and socio-political problem but are also connected to a personal story. To draw attention to remaining skills and abilities and to focus on these despite a chronic disease, may be the determining factor which decides whether sufferers can gain enough strength and motivation to continue or return to the labour market.

#4: Address discrimination against persons with chronic diseases

Affected people still face prejudice and discrimination in the labour market. Statutory regulations are an appropriate way of dealing with the problem, but nevertheless real conviction by providing and sharing positive examples and experiences is to be preferred.

#5: Raise the importance and priority of RTW on the policy agenda

In terms of the "health-in-all-policies approach" chronic conditions are recognized as a key challenge by all relevant agencies, institutions and organizations. Only cooperation-based and holistic strategies with an explicit focus on chronic diseases are considered to be promising.

#6: Work must reward

The reward for work done is not only for the purpose of living. Earnings pose a motivating factor in the form of appreciation and recognition for individual achievement. That means: both, for sick workers and for the unemployed chronically ill person, work must include a positive cost-benefit ratio. Vice versa, this must also count for entrepreneurs.

#7: Cooperation and systematic cooperation of all relevant players and stakeholders

Both the inclusion and reintegration after a long absence as well as keeping a person in the work process in spite of chronic illness is a process in which many actors and professions should be involved. This involvement and participation is to be welcomed and encouraged. However, a random collaboration and unexplained role profiles waste resources and increase the risk of having those affected becoming a pinball in the professions.

#8: Raise health literacy and empowerment

Affected are to be seen and accepted as experts for their own bodies and their individual lives. As experts they should be able to make decisions which are perceived as healthy decisions - in the sense of the life-course-approach and of healthy living education.

#9: Fill the gap in existing knowledge and extend and maintain evidence and experience based interventions

Many questions regarding the actions and effects of policies, programmes and interventions have been insufficiently answered until now. Any evidence must be saved, spread and reproduced continuously so it can constantly be questioned and re-checked regarding this rapidly changing work environment.

