

Achieving Health and Well-being through Work and Social Inclusion

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Whatever different means they employ all people seek happiness¹. Enjoyment of an optimal state of health is key to human wellbeing. Lack of autonomy in life has enduring negative effects which lead to poor health, economic inactivity and unhappiness. A person's past social experiences are written in to the body's physiology and pathology². Although disadvantage is a cumulative process, it can be altered by prioritising transition to a more advantaged trajectory. Tackling effectively the social determinants of disadvantage, economic inactivity, and thereby health, is not a matter for public health alone; it is a challenge to be met by all health professionals and society. Social integration, personal freedom, family relationships, financial situation, and remunerative work, are among the principal factors that contribute to health and well-being. All these are linked to the life-course perspective.

Worklessness, which includes but is broader than unemployment and economic inactivity, can be destructive to self-respect, brings risks of poor physical and mental health, thwarts the pursuit of happiness, and profoundly handicaps the achievement of well-being.³ Economic, social and moral arguments are advanced which advocate work as the most effective means to improve wellbeing of individuals, their families and their communities.⁴ It is difficult to refute society's moral obligation to do all at its disposal to help people of working age into a life of rewarding work. Health professionals have a singularly important role to play in promoting a desirable shift in culture about work and health. The health professional needs to engage with, and address the psychosocial influences and social contexts of dissatisfaction and perceived "stress" at work, and understand the characteristic organisational

¹ Pascal B, In *Pensees*, ed W F Trotter (1660; New York: Dutton, 1908)

² Blaney D, *Social Determinants of Health*, WHO: 1998

³ Waddell G, Burton AK. *Is Work Good for your Health and Wellbeing?* TSO, London: 2006

⁴ Waddell G, Aylward M, *The Scientific and Conceptual Basis of Incapacity Benefits*. TSO, London: 2005

features of the health-promoting workplace. In taking forward this more commanding role the health professional needs to be informed and assured of the evidence that supports a positive relationship between work, health and wellbeing. It is probable that the beneficial effects of work outweigh the risks of worklessness and the harmful effects of long-term unemployment or prolonged sickness absence from work³. Only by addressing the social gradient in health, advantage, income and well-being and by exploiting the known benefits of work on health will culture change about health and work be achievable. Let us strive to open up avenues to wellbeing for those who need to pass along.

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