

Report from the Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology (CANO/ACIO) Conference

Breast cancer survivorship

CANCER AND WORK

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STUDY SUMMARY: The first Canadian website on return to work after cancer

Maheu C, Parkinson M, Oldfield M, et al. Coming first Canadian website on return to work and cancer for cancer survivors, health care providers, and employers, presented at the 2016 CANO/ACIO Conference, Calgary, Alberta.

Many cancer survivors want and/or need to return to work. However, survivors, healthcare providers (HCPs) and employers generally lack information about returning to and sustaining employment. In this study, a needs assessment was conducted to inform the content development of the first Canadian website on cancer and work (Cancerandwork.ca). Cancer survivors, HCPs, and employers were asked to complete an online survey and rate the importance of selected

topics, provide comments and suggest additional topics. Content analysis and quantitative analysis identified similarities and differences among comments and suggested additional topics for each potential user group. All 3 groups sought information on the cognitive impact of cancer and the need for work adjustments and accommodations, as well as workplace culture, resources and programs, gradual return to work and disclosure. Survivors commented on the impact of cancer on their work ability, understanding the role of each type of HCP and how they can assist with return to work, and relationships with coworkers. Healthcare providers commented on mental health, assessment of work ability and burdensome form completion. Employers commented on workplace communication, reliability, productivity, and the need for alternate management plans and temporary staff to replace absent survivors.

COMMENTARY: Cancer can have negative effects on all aspects of survivors' lives, including their occupational roles.¹ Cancer survivors are at a higher risk for unemployment and are 1.5 times more likely to be unemployed than healthy individuals.² On average, 62% of cancer survivors return to work (RTW) within 12 months following their cancer diagnosis.³ Among survivors who return to work, negative effects of cancer and its treatment can limit their ability to function in their roles as they did before cancer. The level of support cancer survivors receive from employers varies, with decreased support in work environments that are physically demanding, part-time or hourly-paid positions, and in contexts where the cost-benefit of output is of utmost importance.⁴ The results of a systematic review on employment and work-related matters in cancer survivors suggest that 26% to 53% of survivors lose or quit their jobs within 72 months following a cancer diagnosis, and between 23% and 75% of those individuals are reemployed.³

In recognition of the high unemployment rate among cancer survivors, the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC) conducted 3 research projects to explore the perspective of survivors, caregivers and employers on RTW issues after cancer.⁴ Similarities across the projects revealed that the work-related information needs of cancer survivors and employers in Canada have been insufficiently addressed, and identified significant gaps in the availability of RTW resources. Key CPAC recommendations included the need for RTW educational materials for cancer survivors and employers, identification of community RTW services, strategies to increase the success of cancer survivors returning to work, and improved communication among stakeholders.⁴

Building on the CPAC work, Maheu et al. conducted an online survey to assess the information needs of cancer survivors (n=150), HCPs (n=50), and employers (n=50) related to returning to work, remaining at work, changing jobs, or looking for work after a cancer diagnosis. The purpose of this survey was to inform the development of a Canadian RTW website. When asked to prioritize the survey topics, the three groups identified common information needs and ranked all topics as important. Some of the main information needs identified by survey respondents included: 1. educational resources outlining the impacts of cancer on the occupational lives of survivors (e.g. cognitive, emotional and physical effects); 2. recommendations about work adjustments to accommodate for these impacts; 3. guidance on how to plan for an employee's RTW; 4. information on how to communicate with key stakeholders; and 5. tips on how to navigate legal and insurance matters related to employment.

On October 19, 2016, the CancerandWork.ca website was launched as the first of its kind in Canada. With financial support from CPAC and Health Canada, co-principal investigators Dr. Christine Maheu from McGill University and Ms. Maureen Parkinson from the British Columbia Cancer Agency developed the website in partnership with the de Souza Institute and researchers, clinicians, advisory board members, and expert writers. Cancerandwork.ca offers cancer survivors, HCPs and employers comprehensive information, resources and interactive tools to support survivors in returning to work after cancer.

The website is divided into 3 separate sections for survivors, HCPs and employers. Each section includes a list of topics related to work and cancer that is specifically geared

LANDMARKS

to each user group, as well as links to interactive tools and additional resources. For instance, the survivor section includes content on cancer and its impact on work; strategies for managing symptoms; determining one's readiness and capacity to RTW; communicating with HCPs, employers and insurance providers; finances and disability; and law, practice and policy information. The HCP section includes information for clinicians on how to communicate with insurance companies, employers and other parties, and how to effectively complete insurance forms. The employer

section includes information on how cancer might affect employees, the rights and obligations of employers, suggestions for workplace accommodations, and a 6-step RTW interactive planner for employers. The website also provides a separate section with links to interactive tools, including a job analysis tool for cancer survivors and employers, a tracking tool to help survivors better manage their energy, and a cognitive-activity-at-work tool. The website is easy to navigate and incorporates multimedia resources, such as video clips of survivors' experiences in returning to work and webinars for employers. Evaluation of the website is ongoing, and adaptations and improvements to content, usability and navigation will be made based on the results of online surveys and feedback. Metrics will be used to track and report on website traffic and activity.

The high rate of unemployment among cancer survivors highlights the need to improve occupational outcomes for individuals following a cancer diagnosis. Research has identified the need for comprehensive resources to better support the growing population of survivors in returning to work or managing at work after cancer. It will remain challenging to overcome employer concerns when diminished employee reliability and productivity result in increased costs to an organization, however education, resources and tools to assist stakeholders in navigating the RTW process are an important step in alleviating concerns and reducing unemployment rates among cancer survivors. The CancerandWork.ca website is a Canadian-specific resource developed to address key RTW recommendations made by CPAC. This important survivorship initiative will be instrumental in helping to address the RTW information and support needs of survivors, HCPs and employers across the cancer trajectory.

IN BRIEF

Already known

- Cancer survivors are at high risk for unemployment.
- A growing number of cancer survivors in Canada either want or need to return to work (RTW) after cancer.
- There is a lack of resources and tools to support cancer survivors, healthcare providers (HCPs) and employers in assisting survivors to RTW.

What this study showed

- Cancer survivors, HCPs and employers share similar information needs regarding employment and RTW issues.
- A comprehensive resource and toolkit is needed to address the wide range of information needs related to cancer and work for these groups.

Next steps

- Make reintegration of cancer survivors into occupational roles a priority of survivorship initiatives in Canada.
- Evaluate and make ongoing improvements to the Cancerandwork.ca website to meet the needs of cancer survivors, HCPs and employers.
- Determine how to better support marginalized groups, such as survivors working in part-time or hourly-paid positions, to improve these individuals' success at continuing to work or returning to work after a cancer diagnosis.

References

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