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THE IMPACT OF WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITY

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There is strong evidence to show that work is generally good for physical and mental health and well-being^{1,2}. It delivers real benefits not just for individuals and businesses but also for communities, the economy and wider society. It is also recognised that unemployment, precarious work and worklessness are associated with poorer physical and mental health and well-being^{3,4}. Employers and workplaces are also key enablers for providing access to work for those with a disability and other health conditions⁵. As a consequence, being in employment and having access to a job is a key determinant of health.

Employment facilitates access to economic resources that are essential for material well-being and full participation in society. It is central to individual identity, social roles and social status. Within society, employment and socio-economic status are the main drivers of social gradients in physical and mental health and mortality.

Of course, work must be good/decent work as it is recognised that various physical and psychosocial aspects of work can also be detrimental to health. These aspects of employment along with appropriate health and safety measures need to be given the priority they deserve to prevent negative outcomes.

When physicians are treating their patients, it is important to determine work status, be aware of the occupational history and consider the type of work being currently undertaken. This will assist in factoring in a return to work to the clinical care pathway for the patient at the outset. In addition, the physician should be advocating at the patient level that work is generally good for health and more broadly support the creation of job and employment opportunities particularly in socially deprived communities and for those with disability and chronic illness.

The specialty of occupational medicine is uniquely placed to provide support to doctors and their patients. It plays an important role in supporting employers to maintain and promote employee health and wellbeing through assessments of fitness for work, advice about reasonable adjustments, work ability or return to work plans, and signposting to treatment for specific conditions⁶.

In conclusion, there are economic, social and moral arguments that suggest work is the most effective way to improve the well-being of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live. As physicians, we should be advocating for this at both the patient and wider societal level⁷. In addition, these arguments suggest that occupational medicine practitioners will have an increasingly important role to play in public health and public policy in the coming years^{8,9}. In doing so, they will also promote the benefits of good work and employment and how that can assist in reducing health inequity within the population.

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