



Institute of Population and Public Health



## Applied Public Health Chair Impact Case Study

### Dr. Carolyn Dewa: Innovative research to improve mental health in the workplace



#### Research Focus

Mental illness is associated with more lost work days in Canada than any other chronic condition and costs nearly \$18 billion in lost productivity each year. Dr. Carolyn Dewa, Applied Public Health Chair, carried out a multi-year study of more than 11,000 employees to find out what could be done to improve this picture.

Through her research, Dr. Dewa and her colleagues made two important discoveries. First, they found that the strongest predictor for work disability was a person's history of occurrences, with those who had taken disability leave at much greater risk of doing so again than those who hadn't. Second, they found that people with a mental health disability were seven times more likely to take disability leave again than those who had not taken time off. People with a physical illness were only twice as likely.

These findings point clearly to the need for ongoing, long-term support and services to promote the mental health and wellness of employees after they return to work. Support of this kind can also contribute to a healthier workforce by preventing mental health problems from occurring in the first place.

#### Research Impact: Making a Difference

The company involved in the study had been experiencing a steady rise in the rate of employees taking short-term disability leave, much of it due to an increase in disabilities related to mental and behavioural disorders. It is now using the results of the study to tackle this growing problem at its roots.

A plain-language report on the study has been distributed among employees and board members to educate them about mental wellness in the workplace, while the company has used it to create its own mental health strategy and improve its procedures for supporting employees once they have come back to work. The findings have been used to develop a number of targeted initiatives, including weight-loss programs, to help prevent the most common disorders associated with disability leave.



While the competitive and private nature of business has meant a lack of access to employee data of this kind in the past, the company's willingness to share its results have expanded the impact of the study well beyond its walls. More than a dozen media from across the country have covered the findings, proving that interest in this subject is high—as is the need for new information to inform and influence decision making on the subject.

Through these efforts, Dr. Dewa's groundbreaking research has had a positive impact on the well-being of the organization's employees and their families. It has also helped the company better understand the potential contribution of research to planning—in particular, the types of questions that could be answered through data routinely collected at work and others that require new sources of information.

Most importantly, this work has raised national awareness of the issue of mental health in the workplace and the need for all companies to consider mental health promotion strategies that help employees stay in their jobs—whether or not they have had previous disabilities. With this foundation in place, researchers can begin to explore the kinds of support currently available for employees returning from disability leave, identify gaps, and develop effective interventions for ensuring a healthier and more productive workforce.

### Want to Know More?

The results of this study have been published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* and covered by nearly two dozen media, including major newspapers, radio and television stations, and magazines ranging from *Canadian Business* to *Occupational Health and Safety Magazine*.

For more information, visit: [https://knowledgex.camh.net/researchers/areas/work\\_wellbeing/Pages/default.aspx](https://knowledgex.camh.net/researchers/areas/work_wellbeing/Pages/default.aspx)

Dr. Carolyn Dewa is the CIHR/PHAC Applied Public Health Chair in Developing Effective Interventions for Mental Illness and Mental Health in the Working Population

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