

Expectations about work: Young adult's experiences of work after spinal cord injury

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Introduction: Return to work after spinal cord injury is considered one of the most important aspects in the rehabilitation process. Yet employment rates are substantially lower than in the general population. Persons with traumatic spinal cord injury represent a young population and the consequences of long term sick-leave at young age is considerable both for the individual and the society. To improve strategies in vocational rehabilitation it is important to gain knowledge about the personal experience and expectations about return to work after a spinal cord injury.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and expectations about paid work among young adults with spinal cord injury.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 participants with traumatic spinal cord injury between 20-34 years of age, who were 1-5 years post injury and had not yet returned to work after injury. Selection of participants were guided by purposive sampling. Data analysis was performed using constant comparative method.

Results: Four main themes are presented; finding your own way to a day where work is possible, paid work in a climate of high expectations, at a crossroad; expectations for work and education, and finding a possible solution or not. The findings reveal high expectations of ability to work but simultaneously difficulties to design a plan for return to work and lack of support in this process.

Conclusion: The participants in the study represent a vulnerable group in vocational rehabilitation due to their young age and recent injury. Without formal education or experiences of a job suitable considering their injury they are in need of tailored work support as a part of the general rehabilitation.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy: There is a need for occupational therapists to focus on performance of occupational routines in rehabilitation. Performance of occupational routines are necessary to find a new way of managing everyday life after injury and also to include a work routine. Occupational therapist may well function as a coach in worktraining with their competence to match and grade activities for the individual.