Reviewer’s report

Title: When are return-to-work efforts sufficient? A focus group study on identifying factors relevant in the return-to-work process among sick-listed workers with chronic low back pain

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Reviewer: Sylvia Vermeulen

Reviewer’s report:

‘When are return-to-work efforts sufficient? A focus group study on identifying factors relevant in the return-to-work process among sick-listed workers with chronic low back pain’.

This paper aims to identify factors relevant to RTW Effort Sufficiency in case of sick-listed employees with chronic low back pain. Focus groups were held with labour experts at the Dutch Social Insurance Institute to explore arguments and underlying grounds relevant to the assessment of efficiency of the RTW process, which is performed when the sick-listed employee applies for a long-term disability benefit. This study contributes to the need to gain more insight into factors related to an effective RTW process.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. Page 2, abstract, conclusions. The authors state that ‘providing these results to professionals assessing RTW Effort Sufficiency might contribute to a more reliable and systematic approach’. However, this implies that current practice is less reliable and less systematic. Based on what is this assumption made? Clarification is needed.

2. Background, page 3, first sentence. …‘Chronic low back pain is an important cause of work disability and sickness absence’…Please provide supportive literature findings, e.g. Prevalence? Number of disability benefits due to CLBP? Costs?

3. Background, page 3, section 2. … ‘the assessment of RTW Effort Sufficiency (RTW-ES), as part of the RTW process evaluation in relation to the application for disability benefits’… And on page 6, Methods, section Cases. …‘that a report is compiled by the employer, and includes a problem analysis…records of all interventions, conversations and agreements between the parties involved in the RTW process’… And on page 8, Methods, section Assessment. …‘This standard procedure closely resembles the standard procedure used in the Dutch SII’s when assessing RTW-ES’…

Hence, fragmented throughout the manuscript the authors refer to current practice at the Social Insurance Institute regarding the assessment of RTW Effort
Sufficiency. A clear overview is, however, missing. Therefore, to achieve a better understanding of current assessment of RTW Effort Sufficiency in the Netherlands, a more comprehensive description is needed, e.g. a separate section in the introduction. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the preconditions for RTW Effort Sufficiency including mandatory RTW actions are formulated in the Dutch Gatekeeper Act, such as the making of a problem analysis and a RTW action plan. This offers a framework for assessment of RTW efforts. This is not mentioned and should be part of the description of current practice.

4. Background, page 4, section 2. The authors state that it is interesting to know whether factors relevant to the assessment of RTW Effort Sufficiency can be fitted within the ICF model, to improve comparability and provide a clear overview.

Although this seems a valuable approach, the added value of fitting the study findings within the ICF model needs more support. Further explanation is needed.

5. Methods, page 6, section Focus groups.

Please describe the recruitment procedure of the labour experts, e.g. How were the labour experts approached? How many labour experts were approached? Did they work at the same Social Insurance Institute office?

6. Methods, page 7. The cases represented long-term sick-listed employees without comorbidity. This raises an important question, namely is this representative for long-term work disabled employees with chronic low back pain, i.e. 2 years after reporting sick?

Why not, for instance, present one case with and one case without comorbidity?


What in case participants did not agree with a ground provided for a certain factor? Clarification is needed.

8. Discussion, page 18, reference 23. This reference seems not valid. The authors refer to a prospective cohort study among workers claiming earnings-related compensation for low back pain. Information obtained at the time of the initial claim was linked to compensation status 3 months later. Assessment of RTW Effort Sufficiency by the labour expert is, however, performed 2 years after the initial claim of work disability (i.e. first day of reporting sick). Hence, some reservation when comparing both studies seems necessary. Furthermore, Fransen and colleagues (=reference 23) show that unavailability of light duties on return to work (=no availability of modified work) is related to transition from acute to chronic low back pain. The statement of the authors that the study findings of Fransen and colleagues indicate that temporary work prolongs time to RTW needs more clarification.
Minor Essential Revisions

9. In the title of the manuscript the phrase ‘sick-listed workers’ is used. However, throughout the manuscript the authors refer to ‘sick-listed employees’. If the aim of the study is to explore RTW Effort Sufficiency of sick-listed employees, then this should be mentioned in the title. Workers are not merely (regular) employees, but can also refer to non-employees such as self-employed workers, temporary agency workers or unemployed workers.

10. Background, page 3, section 2. …‘assessing RTW-ES is of importance when considering remaining possibilities of the employee and determining future RTW opportunities’…

Remaining functional possibilities is more clear.

Also, it is of importance to assess if RTW opportunities are missed. Because, as mentioned further on (page 4), sanctions are possible if RTW efforts are not sufficient and blameworthy. Sanction for an employer can be delay in awarding disability benefit with prolongation of payment of wages by the employer, and the employee can lose employment protection. These consequences of insufficient RTW effort can be described as part of the aforementioned description of current practice (embedded within the Dutch Gatekeeper Act).

11. Background, page 4, section 1. If RTW efforts are not sufficient application for disability benefits can be delayed. For how long? Is there a maximum delay? This explanation could be incorporated in the aforementioned description of current practice.

12. Background, page 4, section 3. …‘A possible source of information about factors relevant to the assessment of RTW-ES is the implicit knowledge of the professionals performing the assessment’…

Is there no explicit knowledge available, e.g. working procedures at the Dutch Social Insurance Institute? If not, this should be mentioned.

Discretionary Revisions

13. Background, page 3, last sentence. The phrase ‘earning capacity’ needs more clarification. It implies understanding of the Dutch long-term disability assessment practice. This cannot be assumed among an international readership.

14. Methods, page 6, section Cases.

A problem analysis is made by an occupational physician.


To increase readability of the manuscript placement of the cases within boxes is recommended.

16. The manuscript contains many not generally known abbreviations, e.g.
RTW-ES, LE, SII. Using no abbreviations in these cases is recommended.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.