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

Version: 2 Date: 26 September 2011

Reviewer: Nathalie Donders

Reviewer’s report:

Major Compulsory Revisions

• In my opinion, the authors do not explain very well in the introduction why it is relevant to fit the factors within the ICF model.

• Methods, section ‘cases’: why did the authors choose for two cases of chronic low back pain instead of two completely different cases? Are the cases comparable with ‘average cases’ that LE’s are working on, or are the cases less or more difficult/complicated than average?

• Paragraph ‘arguments and grounds’ in the results section: 58 factors were reduced to 19 factors. Table 1 is nearly a copy of the text in the results section (and seems almost redundant), isn’t it possible to elaborate on the reduction of 58 to 19 factors somewhere? Which choices were made in this step?

• In the discussion the authors mention: “another strength lies in the universal phrasing of the grounds mentioned by the LE’s”. Does this mean that there wasn’t much variety in the grounds? That was not reported in the results section. If the LE’s had substantial agreement, that is worth mentioning in my opinion.

Discretionary Revisions

• Are the participating labour experts representative for that occupational group?

• It is a bit confusing that in the introduction it is mentioned that there are no guidelines to assess RTW-ES. However, in the paragraph ‘Assesement, first focus group meeting’ the authors mention that the LE’s had access to their usual sources of information, e.g. guidelines. What kind of guidelines do the authors mean?

• Results section: phrases as ‘as the LEs stated’, ‘also mentioned by the LE’s’ and ‘according to the LE’s’ are redundant.

• Paragraph personal domain, age: the educational level is an indicator of the possibilities to RTW. However, the direction of the association is not mentioned. I suppose that persons with a higher educational level have more possibilities to RTW than persons with a low educational level?

• Paragraph environmental domain, work-relatedness of sickness absence. Is the presented ground the only ground. I could imagine that when the sickness absences is work-related, the employee might be reluctant to return to the work
that made him/her ill.

• I miss factors such as problems in the family, or support from relevant others. It may very well be that the LE’s did not mention those. In the discussion the authors mention other factors that didn’t come up in the results (gender, work requirements). I would prefer to get an explanation about this.

• Discussion: I don’t fully understand the sentence: Fewer efforts can be undertaken when an employee with limited capacity is involved. Does it mean: there is no need to undertake efforts? Or is it a result: there is limited capacity, so efforts aren’t useful? (Based on the following sentence, I think it is the latter meaning?)

• Discussion: the authors mention the comparibility of factors related to RTW-ES and RTW: The relationship between employer and employee is relevant in both. Is that really the only thing these outcomes have in common. Why is there a lack of similarity between these outcomes?

Minor Revisions
Employer attitude -> employer’s attitude
Paragraph Measures, first sentence: reverse ‘monitoring’ and ‘research/assessment’, so that sentence has the same order as the rest of the paragraph and the table.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   Yes
2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   Yes
3. Are the data sound?
   Yes
4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
   Yes
5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
   Yes
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
   Yes
7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
   Yes
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Title: the question 'When are return to work efforts sufficient' is misleading. The manuscript does not pass judgement on the quality of a number of RTW efforts, but investigated which factors are relevant.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
Yes

**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'