Reviewer’s report

Title: Return-to-work of sick-listed workers without an employment contract - what works?

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Reviewer: Pekka Virtanen

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This quantitative study from Netherlands analyses whether various interventions provided by occupational health care (OHC) are associated with return-to-work (RTW) of sick-listed workers who have no employment contract. Moreover, there is descriptive analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of the cohort.

My overall impression of the manuscript can be summarised in two comments:

1. Descriptive analysis (including perceived health and type of the health problem) is relatively uninteresting, in particular as 66% of the initial sample did not reply in the questionnaire.

2. The low response rate is less problematic as regards analysis of the OHC interventions. The question of health care of ‘non-standard’ work force is also internationally important. Thus, this study might be of interest in the field of health services research rather than of public health research. I also focus this review on the ‘health services track’ of the manuscript.

Major compulsory revisions

1. For non-Dutch readers the manuscript should include more detailed description of the OHC that the SSA is responsible to organise:
   - the concept ‘OHC professional’ suggests that there are also other professionals than ‘insurance physicians’; are there for instance occupational health nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists?
   - how is the client informed the when (s)he becomes entitled to OHC
   - did all participants visit OHC at least once?
   - who makes initiative of OHC visit? are the clients invited to health check-ups? is visiting voluntary or is non-visiting sanctioned?
   - is OHC limited to advising and /or health promotion, or do the insurance physicians also have the role of clients’ family physician, i.e. are they also responsible for therapy of illnesses which all clients, by definition, have?
   - does the OHC relationship end when the client recovers, i.e. moves from sick list to ‘healthy’ job seeker?

2. The outcome variable raises two questions:
- did the questionnaire address separately work with a contract and work without a contract (e.g. agency work), or was employment in any job classified as RTW?
- ‘recovery’ (see above) could be an interesting and relevant outcome variable, as the OHC intervention obviously also aims to improve clients’ health; could it be possible to construct a three class outcome: RTW, non-RTW non-sick-listed, non-RTW sick listed?

3. There is the subtitle ‘Non-response analysis’ but in fact non analysis is presented. The authors should report on which ‘population data’ they base their conclusion.

4. It remains unclear whether the low rate of OHC interventions, which the authors characterise as ‘striking’, is due to low rate of visits or due to deficient practices of OHC professionals. The authors should clarify/discuss this.

5. The findings of this study can not be utilised in arguing that OHC interventions promote RTW (top paragraph of p. 14). As the author state later (Weaknesses section, p 15), causality of the found associations has to be investigated with different study designs.

6. ‘Policy implications’ chapter (p. 15-16) should be rewritten, presentation of current and future research plans can not be considered as policy implications.

Minor comments

1. In abstract the abbreviations (RTW, OHC) are used without explanation.

2. What means ‘type of worker’ (in Methods paragraph of Abstract)?

3. I do not like the first sentence of the manuscript (p. 4): its focus is unclear, the syntax is complex, maybe because the authors try to say too much.

4. The paragraph about temporary agency work (p. 5) does not belong in ‘Dutch Social Security System’ subchapter.

5. The sentence ‘This study was…’ (p. 6) looks lonely; the information should be included in the text below.

6. The abbreviation TNO (p. 7) should be explained.

7. Table legends may not include abbreviations.

8. Figure: the number of ‘remaining workers’ grows from 300 to 301 after response; how is this explained?

9. Table 4: classification of the p-values with stars is unnecessary

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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