

Making sick notes work for you and your patient

Sick notes are powerful tools for communicating your patient's current and evolving restrictions and capabilities to an employer. They are also tools for allowing a patient's early return to work, specifying accommodations when required.

Effective sick note content has been the subject of numerous position statements by groups within¹ and outside of Canada. One important position is the Canadian Medical Association's 2013 policy.² The policy reviews the roles of the family physician, employer, patient/employee, and other stakeholders (government, unions, insurers, etc.) in promoting a safe, effective, and early return to work. The policy addresses:

- diagnosing and treating the illness or injury, and advising and supporting the patient
- providing and communicating appropriate information to the patient and the employer
- working closely with other involved health care professionals to facilitate the patient's safe and timely return to the most productive employment possible

In essence, your role in supporting your patient's early and safe return to work is to provide continuing, accurate, and detailed impairment information and its impact on your patient's function at work. With this information, the employer can then deal with medically required restrictions and limitations and provide appropriate accommodation, all with the goal of timely and appropriate return to work.

Sick notes that do not contain meaningful functional or impairment information can significantly delay the return to work process, and negatively affect your patient.

Providing accurate, continuing impairment information as your patient's medical condition mends and ultimately reaches maximum medical improvement allows continuing, appropriate, and progressive work activities. The shared goal is a return to full regular activities, including work activities, when safe and feasible.

This successful process of early and safe return to work positively benefits everyone. When family physicians follow this guidance patients can return to work without worsening their medical condition and avoid the negative consequences of a delayed return to work.

Dr Joel Anderson, Committee Chair

¹ Workplace Health, Safety & Compensation Commission of Newfoundland and Labrador. Early and Safe Return-to-Work (ESRTW). http://www.whscc.nl.ca/EMP_EarlyAndSafeRTW.whscc. Accessed February 2016.

² Canadian Medical Association. The treating physician's role in helping patients return to work after an illness or injury. <http://policybase.cma.ca/dbtw-wpd/Policypdf/PD13-05.pdf>. Updated 2013. Accessed February 2016.

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