Abstract:

The economics and occupational health literature has only recently begun to focus on the long-term consequences of workplace injuries and illnesses. Under-studied questions about the experience of workers after occupational injury include:

- what determines a successful return to work, i.e., to what extent workers are able to remain employed after their first return to work
- whether employees suffer uncompensated long-term income losses because of injuries or illnesses
- whether workers suffer reduced productivity in their household work, as well as a reduced ability to participate more generally in the life of their families and communities
- whether individuals’ job related health problems affect the employability of family members.

Among the leading causes of work absenteeism in general are musculoskeletal disorders, acute injury, and mental health problems. High rates of these problems are reported in the health care sector, which is a major source of employment in eastern Massachusetts. Health care employees face a very particular work environment, including time pressure related to shortages of labor supply; the common perception that “risk” is part of their job description; and their exposure to several unrecognized sources of mental stress. While their working conditions may cause or exacerbate the risks of health problems, poor health status in turn has a strong negative effect on labor force participation, with obvious economic consequences.

A study of differences in working conditions and health by socioeconomic position (class, gender, and ethnicity) is presently underway in selected health care institutions in the Merrimac Valley. We hypothesize that consequences of occupational injury and illness are worse for those with lower socioeconomic position and are mediated by work environment characteristics, including both the nature and intensity of job demands and the extent of workplace accommodation post-injury. The expected findings may have implications for public policies designed to compensate workers and to speed their return to work.