



# CANWON Training School: Intervention studies in the field of Cancer and Work

by Silvia Fernández Martínez

The [Second edition of the CANWON Training School](#) – which is concerned with studies in cancer and work – took place on 18, 19 and 20 of February 2015 at the University Babeş Bolyai of Cluj Napoca (Romania). [CANWON](#) is a [COST Action](#), the longest-running European framework supporting transnational cooperation among researchers, engineers and scholars across Europe.

CANWON aims to integrate the emerging knowledge on cancer and work to gain insight into the return-to-work process in cancer survivors, the work-related costs of cancer survivorship and the role of employers, while developing and evaluating innovative interventions which effectively enhance cancer patients' work participation. The Action created four Working Groups that intend to explore complementary research areas under four themes and action plans: 1) Prognostic factors of work participation of cancer patients; 2) The work-related costs of cancer survivorship; 3) The role of employers in the work participation of cancer patients; 4) The development of innovative interventions to enhance work participation of cancer patients (A. DE BOER, "The European Cancer and Work Network: CANWON" in *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, n. 24, 2014).

The main topic of this Training School is included in the fourth working group and the course leader was Anja Merhnert, who chaired this working session.

The target group was for the most part formed by junior researchers engaged in or planning to start intervention studies in cancer and work. There were also occupational therapists, psychologists, social workers and even nurses specialised in the field.

In addition to health, work is the area of life on which cancer has the biggest impact. The number of patients with cancer is increasing and their early retirement is an important socioeconomic factor that impacts on the sustainability of welfare systems. As the return to work and the job retention of cancer patients appear to be difficult, support measures are needed. How is it possible to achieve this goal? Giving an answer to this question has been the main goal of this Training School. This objective has to be fulfilled through the identification of certified and reliable instruments in all countries to single out the best practices enhancing cancer patients to re-enter the labour market.

This has to be done through a multidisciplinary approach, for instance by combining legal and medical expertise. Interventions that combine vocational, medical and psychological advice will promote the return to work of this category of workers. Legislation is concurrently the main facilitator and the main barrier for the implementation of these interventions.

It is commonly accepted that the effective management of mental health problems is as important as the treatment of a tumour, not only for the recovery of the patient but also to help him/her to re-enter the labour market.

However, professionals that have to deal with this disease lack specific skills and they do not use standard practices in terms of work assessment. Even if the psychological needs of cancer patients are gaining more importance, in most countries they are not included in National Cancer Plans (Romania's case). These support measures cannot be implemented only at health facilities, but

should be adopted also at the community or even at workplace level, where the employer can offer psychological support to sick workers.

An evaluation of the adequacy of these measures is needed to improve their effectiveness, and the Cochrane review is a good tool in this connection. It is a strict and organized review process that aims to analyse the literature in the field with a focus on the articles that include quality evidence in order to provide the best results to health care (A. DE BOER, T. TASKILA, S. TAMMINGA, M. FRINGS-DRESEN, M. FEURSTEIN, J. VERBEEK, “Interventions to enhance return-to-work for cancer patients” (Review), The Cochrane Collaboration, John Willey & Sons, 2011).

However, a person-directed intervention is not enough. A multidisciplinary intervention must be also work-directed, meaning that the workplace has also to be adapted (e.g. tasks and working hours).

One solution may be to refer to a supervisor to help the employer to make proper adjustments. But for small companies it is very difficult to re-employ an employee with cancer.

Returning to work after cancer is also dependent upon the reaction of co-workers. The re-employment of an employee who has not the same working abilities as his/her colleagues can affect the productivity of the company and the team, more generally. This could lead to a hostile working environment and discriminatory practices which, in turn, could have an adverse effect on sick workers' health.


Communication between professionals who take part in the treatment of cancer patients and the employer is essential in terms of return to work and job retention, while allowing stakeholders to better know which interventions are more effective and the best way to improve them. The Training School also featured a number of group discussions that gave the opportunity to exchange views and knowledge with other trainees in a multidisciplinary and comparative perspective.

The main conclusion that one can draw after participating in the Training School was that interdisciplinary measures are more efficient than unrelated actions.

The psychological and medical dimension is important to help sick workers to be reemployed and keep their job, but legislative measures also bear relevance in that they help employers and employees to pursue their interests in the employer relationship.

By bringing together experts in different fields (cancer and work participation, oncology, occupation health, economics, epidemiology, psychology and social sciences), the Training School contributed to fulfil one of the CANWON's objectives, that of discussing the interventions needed in this field.

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