

5 December 2015

To whom it may concern,

We write regarding the *Willing to Work Inquiry* being conducted by the Australian Human Rights Commission. We are academics who have conducted considerable research on employment and disability which may be of interest to the Commission in their deliberations. A brief summary of our research is outlined below. (Note some of the work has not yet been published in academic journals so is described in general terms.)

### **Our research**

Our research is based on analyses of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers and the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey – a national longitudinal survey. It is well established participation in paid employment is low for Australians with disabilities. Our research suggests that participation in paid employment is lowest for people with severe disabilities and people with psychological and intellectual impairments (1, 2). We have also demonstrated that levels of participation in paid employment among people with disabilities did not improve during the period from 1998 to 2009 (2).

There is considerable literature that demonstrates the potential health benefits of employment (3). Our research demonstrates that the mental health and wellbeing benefits of employment are even greater for people with disabilities than people without disabilities. This is particularly important because people with disabilities have lower overall levels of mental health and wellbeing (even those without psychological impairments) (4). This means that increasing participation in paid employment is likely to reduce the financial and social costs of poor mental health among people with disabilities.

Not all employment is equally beneficial for health. Some jobs may actually be detrimental to health. Our research demonstrates that people with disabilities are more likely to be in poor psychosocial quality jobs that might adversely affect their health. For example, in a rigorous causal analysis we found that people with disabilities are more likely to perceive their pay to be unfair (5). This is an issue of organisational justice. People with disabilities are also more likely to experience one or more job adversities (poor control over the work that they do, low job security, high demands, and perceived unfairness of pay). People with intellectual disabilities are most likely to experience one or more job adversities (6). In longitudinal analyses we have shown that, similar to people without disabilities, these job adversities are detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of people with disabilities (7).

### **Implications of research**

Our research highlights the importance of improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities however it also underscores the importance of the quality of their jobs. The poorer quality of jobs we observed for people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities may reflect discrimination experienced in recruitment, tasks assigned in the workplace, organisational justice (in terms of fairness of pay) and job security. While the policy goal of improving participation in paid employment by people with disabilities is a critical one, it is important that the Inquiry also consider the importance of people with disabilities being employed in high quality, health promoting jobs; otherwise, the jobs will not be sustainable and the mental health and wellbeing of people with disabilities will suffer. Finally, we stress the importance of improving participation in paid employment for people with psychosocial and intellectual impairments.

Finally, we have recently received a large grant from the Australian Research Council in partnership with a number of organisations to investigate employment outcomes for people with disabilities who register with employment services. This research is set to make major contributions to policy development in this area in the future. Details are at the bottom of this letter.

We are happy to provide you with further details if you require it including copies of our published manuscripts. Our details are in the signature below.

Yours sincerely  
Professor Anne Kavanagh



Centre for Health Equity  
Melbourne School of Population and Global Health  
The University of Melbourne  
Phone: 03 8344 0717, email [a.kavanagh@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:a.kavanagh@unimelb.edu.au)

on behalf of the 'Disability, Employment and Health Inequalities' research team. The team includes Professor Anne Kavanagh (University of Melbourne), Professor Tony LaMontagne (Deakin University), Dr Allison Milner (Deakin University), Dr Rebecca Bentley (University of Melbourne), Lauren Krnjacki (University of Melbourne) and Zoe Aitken (University of Melbourne)

#### **Australian Research Council Linkage grant**

Improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities, ARC \$677,681 and partner contributions \$262,000

#### *Investigators*

Professor Anne Kavanagh (Melbourne University)  
Dr Allison Milner (Deakin University),  
Professor Tony LaMontagne (Deakin University),  
Dr Ann Nevile (ANU),  
Dr Cathy Vaughan (Melbourne University)  
Dr Rebecca Bentley (CHE) with  
*partner investigators* Mr Peter Defteros (Jobs Australia), Bevan Burkin (Disability Employment Australia), Ms Kerrie Langford (National Disability Services), Mr Cain Beckett (PriceWaterhouseCoopers)

*Partner organisations* are: National Disability Services; Disability Employment Australia; Jobs Australia; Ostara Australia; Workpower; Wise Employment; The Personnel Group; Matchworks; Steps Disability; E-Focus; PricewaterhouseCoopers; Nova Employment & Training Program; Australian Federation of Disability Organisations.

#### **References**

**The University of Melbourne**  
Alice Hoy Building, Victoria 3010 Australia  
T: +61 3 8344 8166 F: +61 3 9347 2468 E: [l.yates@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:l.yates@unimelb.edu.au)

1. Kavanagh AM, Krnjacki L, Aitken Z, LaMontagne AD, Beer A, Baker E, et al. Intersections between disability, type of impairment, gender and socio-economic disadvantage in a nationally representative sample of 33,101 working-aged Australians. *Disability and Health Journal* 2014;doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2014.08.008. [Epub ahead of print].
2. Kavanagh AM, Krnjacki L, Beer A, Lamontagne AD, Bentley R. Time trends in socio-economic inequalities for women and men with disabilities in Australia: evidence of persisting inequalities. *International Journal of Health Equity*. 2013;12(73).
3. LaMontagne A, Keegel T. Work environments as a determinant of health. In: Keleher H, MacDougall C, editors. *Understanding Health: A Determinants Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2009. p. 201-17.
4. Milner A, LaMontagne AD, Aitken Z, Bentley R, Kavanagh AM. Employment status and mental health among persons with and without a disability: evidence from an Australian cohort study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 2014;68(11):1064-71.
5. Milner A, Aitken Z, Krnjacki L, Bentley R, Blakely T, LaMontagne AD, Kavanagh AM. Perceived fairness of pay among people with and without disabilities. *Scand J Work, Environment Health* 2015 Sep 1;41(5):451-9. doi: 10.5271/sjweh.3515
6. LaMontagne AD, Krnjacki L, Milner A, Butterworth P, Kavanagh AM. Psychosocial job quality in a nationally representative sample of working Australians: A comparison of persons working with versus without disability. Submitted to journal.
7. Milner A, Krnjacki L, Butterworth P, Kavanagh A, LaMontagne AD. Does disability status modify the association between psychosocial job quality and mental health? A longitudinal fixed effects analysis. *Nov;144:104-11*. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.09.024. Epub 2015 Sep 18