

MASSAGE ON THE JOB

PILOT STUDY: THE IMPACT OF A WELLNESS INTERVENTION ON WORKPLACE HEALTH



PROJECT FOCUS



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Vancouver Coastal Health

Introduction

As an occupational group healthcare workers suffer a tremendous risk of workplace injuries. While many initiatives have been implemented in the past to reduce the risk of injury and assist with safe return to work, the primary focus of these has been on the physical aspects of injury prevention, such as implementing engineering controls, or providing education and training on proper biomechanics. The well being of the worker, however, has seldom been addressed in a holistic approach, in which other psychosocial stresses related to organizational culture and job satisfaction are considered.

The prevalence of workplace injuries is evident in the BC healthcare industry, with a large percentage of them being musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs). These injuries vary considerably by sub sector (acute care, long-term care, and home and community care) and by occupation (e.g. Registered Nurse, Licensed Practical Nurse, and Care Aide), based on time-loss injury rates. Nurses have the highest use of sick hours out of any workforce in Canada. They also have a longer duration of time-loss and are more likely to miss work each week due to an illness or injury than employees in any other sector or in other types of shift-working occupations.

Factors contributing to this injury trend are multi-dimensional. In addition to physical demands, healthcare workers experience other psychosocial stresses related to organizational culture and job satisfaction. Research has shown that a combination of work-related characteristics, such as high work demands, coupled with

individual characteristics (psychological stress, gender, personality) can predict job satisfaction, work stress and the chances of reporting work-related injury.

The use of massage therapy has been recommended to combat work related anxiety, depression, and musculoskeletal pain. This type of therapy involves manual manipulation of the soft tissues of the body and various forms of movements are regulated to produce specific treatment responses. Massage therapy has been shown to reduce pain and discomfort associated with MSI, lower stress perception, increase relaxation, and improve the overall mood of those who receive the treatment. Implementing on-site massage therapy programs in healthcare demonstrates a positive impact on the physical and mental well-being of individuals.

Why the Study?

With past initiatives focusing primarily on physical factors in the reduction/elimination of MSIs, this study endeavored to explore the effects of mental well-being on physical health and safety through a wellness intervention. The holistic approach of a wellness intervention focuses on the promotion or maintenance of good health rather than correction of poor health.

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Identify and evaluate workplace morale and job satisfaction of front-line long-term care staff
2. Use a participatory approach for development of a staff-focused relaxation modality
3. Determine the effects of the relaxation modality on:
 - a. Workplace stress
 - b. Job satisfaction
 - c. Pain and discomfort

The perceptions of massage therapy, as described by those who completed the questionnaires, were reported to be positive and effective. Sample comments included:

“The program really helps relax me and provides a day or two of relief from stress/headache thus enabling me to concentrate at work.”

“It was mentally refreshing to know that someone out there cares for our well being, from this I gained strength and encouragement to carry out highly physical and mentally challenging job tasks.”

Methods

George Pearson Centre (GPC), a group home in Vancouver, British Columbia, for adults with severe disabilities, was chosen as the facility at which Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) would put in place a pilot program to evaluate the effectiveness of an employer-provided relaxation modality for staff. A participatory approach, involving feedback from staff, was used to determine the wellness intervention of choice; and massage therapy was selected from a list which included integrative energy healing, nap/sleep room, or no wellness program at all.

The evaluation of the study followed a quasi-experimental time-series design. Six matched questionnaires were distributed: 3 pre-intervention and 3 post-intervention. Participants were asked to rate job satisfaction, workplace stress, pain, and discomfort.

During the intervention period, massage therapy sessions were offered on-site by four Registered Massage Therapists (RMTs) over a four week period. Participants were allowed to sign up for one 20 minute session each week. The following treatment techniques were used: tapotement (vibration, percussion), effleurage (glide, touch, or stroke lightly), petrissage (kneading, rolling, wringing), passive stretching, grade 1 or 2 joint mobilization, and active and passive range of motion. Treatment was limited to neck, shoulders, upper back, lower back, and arms while participants were fully clothed sitting prone.

Findings

Demographic information was provided by 98 participants, 80% of whom were female while 20% were male. Participant ages ranged from 31–50 years old. The number of massage sessions attended by participants did not influence their perception of psychological and social constructs (work culture, job demands, social demands, or control at work).

Using massage therapy as a short-term intervention of choice showed initial benefits in terms of pain severity with possible improvement in job satisfaction and morale. The results also suggested that using massage therapy as a wellness intervention would have the greatest impact on individuals with pre-existing musculoskeletal signs and symptoms. However, the impact did not have a lasting effect due to the limited length of time granted for the study.

Next Steps

This project suggests that targeted individuals (i.e. those with pre-existing musculoskeletal signs and symptoms) are most likely to benefit from a massage therapy workplace wellness program. The program must be sustained, as only short-term effectiveness was observed. The outcome of the study prompts for further investigation of the long term efficacy of massage therapy treatment as a wellness intervention that combats psychosocial risk factors and the physical effects of work-related injuries, and produces long term health benefits to healthcare workers. The effects of combining a massage therapy program with other health and safety programs should be explored.

For more information about this study, including a list of references and future strategic direction of the initiative, please contact the Ergonomics Program at OHSAH.