

The hidden risks of head injury

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Volunteering at a Day Centre for people with head injuries, as part of my research, provides a different perspective on life. You get to hear comments such as “The general public don't understand what head injury is... they look at you and think you're perfectly normal”.

This seemingly simple statement highlights a potentially serious problem for head injury sufferers in a climate where government is pushing to get those who are on disability benefit back to work.

Most people who have traumatic brain injuries have spent months if not years undergoing rehabilitation. This involves coming to terms with their injuries (O'Callaghan, Powell, and Oyeboode, 2006) and the fact that they are no longer able to work. Many people with brain injuries, especially men, still feel they should be the 'breadwinner' but their injuries have meant they have been 'pensioned off', often at a young age. As well as losing their employment, many also lose their self-esteem. Their work is synonymous with their concept of self. Losing their work has caused added sorrow for many whose lives have been instantly changed by their injuries.

Hidden problems like memory lapses, not remembering your pin number or even your colleagues names are bad enough, but not remembering what you were doing on a production line is potentially a far more dangerous issue. Hearing difficulties, inability to fill in forms, write or add up, are hidden disabilities, and bring with them shame, embarrassment and negative comments from others (O'Callaghan, et al., 2006).

The fear that benefits will stop and the person forced to return to the workplace when they have been forced out of it by serious injury is causing a great deal of stress and anxiety, and is not helping the recovery process. Additionally, increasing surveillance, which portrays someone as 'non-disabled' because their injuries are hidden is not helping to improve this situation. Rehabilitation aims to support people to participate in social activities (Riley, Brennan, and Powell, 2004) and it ought to be understood that returning to work is the 'gold standard', and is not going to be achieved by many whose injuries are severe.

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