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Publications included in this dissertation

Joy Van de Cauwer, Hanna Van Schoorisse, Dominique Van de Velde, Joz Motmans, and Lutgart Braeckman. 2021 Nov 1st. Return to Work of Transgender People: A Systematic Review through the Blender of Occupational Health. PLoS One 16 (11). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0259206. Published Nov 1st 2021

Joy Van de Cauwer, Dominique Van de Velde, Joz Motmans, Els Clays, and Lutgart Braeckman. Exploring Work Absences and Return to Work during Social Transition and Following Gender-Affirming Care, a Mixed-Methods Approach: 'Bridging Support Actors through Literacy.' Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation. doi:10.1007/s10926-023-10139-x. Published first online 21 Oct 2023.

Joy Van de Cauwer, Joz Motmans, Dominique Van de Velde, and Lutgart Braeckman. Understanding Understanding sustainable RTW during gender transition, a (mixed method) diary-based single-case study of a transgender woman: 'spiegel im spiegel'. International Journal of Transgender Health; in peer review.

Joy Van de Cauwer, Joz Motmans, Dominique Van de Velde, Lisa Bernaers, Lutgart Braeckman. Perceptions of occupational physicians in supporting transgender and gender diverse people (returning) at work, a focus groups study: 'The uncharted territory of gender-diverse occupational healthcare.' BMJ OPEN; in peer review.

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Joy Van de Cauwer

Understanding Gender Dynamics in Return to Work of Transgender and Gender Diverse People



A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Academic year 2023-2024
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About Joy Van de Cauwer (She/Her)



Bachelor in Biomedical sciences, 2003
Bachelor and Master in Medicine 2004, 2009
Master in Occupational Medicine 2016
Specialist in Occupational Medicine 2018



Clinical experience 2009-2013
Occupational health experience 2013-present
(including Belgian Railways)



Academic assistant and PhD track 2017-2024
Acquired a special research fund RIZIV (2019-2025)

Background

- Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals face challenges due to societal stress, stigma, and discrimination affecting their health and well-being.
- Gender transition may lead to work absence(s).
- In Belgium, workers have occupational health support, including guidance from an occupational physician.
- Accessing healthcare and navigating work-related health require health literacy which is related to empowerment.

Aims and methods

This dissertation aims to:

1. Explore work absences and return to work (RTW) during gender transition.
2. Understand how this RTW can be sustained.
3. Explore how occupational physicians can support TGD people returning to work and address the work-related health challenges during gender transition.

This research collectively provides an elaborate in-depth exploration of these RTW challenges and opportunities during gender transition through four original studies by mixing several methods, such as a literature review, an anonymous questionnaire, individual and group interviews and diary-entries (including validated questionnaires and thematic reflections).

Findings

Study 1 : systematic literature review

- Gap of knowledge regarding work absences and the RTW process during gender transition.
- One study reported 2 weeks to 4 weeks sick leave related to psychosocial reasons
- Limited involvement of occupational physicians in gender transition

Study 2 : mixed methods study of adult Belgian TGD workers

- Work absences mostly during social transition and after gender-affirming surgery
- High RTW and with same employer
- Total sick leave equals that of general population
- Lower health literacy level
- Coping strategies are 'people pleasing' and using personal days
- Strained work-life balance
- OP and occupational health services (OHS) are potential mediators and allies
- Need for transition plan with RTW strategies, health literacy-friendly environment (e.g. centralized information) and gender-inclusive supportive measures (transition leave)

Study 3: mixed methods case study of a (trans) woman

- 1- year follow-up of gender transition and RTW after gender-affirming surgery
- Fluctuating emotions, gender dynamics, perceptions and expectations between the TGD worker and their environment.
- Need for better interdisciplinary aftercare and flexible dynamic work accommodations in collaboration with OHS
- Need for education for all stakeholders including realistic RTW expectations, and balanced inclusive healthcare and work environment



“Just knowing that there is an occupational physician would have done a lot for me”



“The work environment has not kept up with my growth as a woman
You soon enter a stage of tolerance but not acceptance”



Study 4 : focusgroup study of occupational physicians

- Limited experience with TGD workers
- Creating gender-sensitive professional attitudes with multidisciplinary training
- Acknowledging needs of both employer and employee
- Overarching legal framework to establish equity and inclusion in RTW action plans.

“first a 'triggering' needs to happen and create awareness and that 'good practices' (tool) before (multidisciplinary) GAC training.
It could maybe be a case within a broader theme of reintegration (training).”

Conclusions and Future research

This dissertation is the first to provide insights on gender transition, return to work (RTW), the needs of transgender and gender diverse workers, and the role of occupational physicians. It emphasizes creating a health literacy-friendly and inclusive work environment and healthcare system for the well-being of all workers.

Further research should include gender diverse workers and involve various stakeholders such as general practitioners, surgeons, nurses, and occupational health professionals through qualitative and mixed methods research to develop a Return to Work tool.

Contact

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