


Center on Knowledge Translation *for*  
Disability and Rehabilitation Research

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# Returning to Work after Burn Injury: From Research to Vocational Rehabilitation Practice

*A webcast of the Center on Knowledge Translation  
for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (KTDRR)*

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## Agenda

- Overview of Activity
- Presenters
- Discussion
- Wrap up

## Overview

- What is research and its evidence base on employment for individuals with burn injury?
- What does research say about the key issues that VR practitioners should consider in supporting clients to return to work after burn injury?
- What are some of the VR practices related to supporting burn survivors returning to work?
- What is the role of practice guidelines in supporting VR practitioners to work with clients with burn injury?

## Presenters

- **Nicole S. Gibran**, MD, FACS, Professor of Surgery and Medical Director of the University of Washington Medicine Regional Burn Center at Harborview Medical Center, Past President of the American Burn Association.
- **Greg Trapp**, JD, Executive Director of the New Mexico Commission for the Blind.
- **Sabina Brych**, BA, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at the University of Washington Medicine Regional Burn Center at Harborview Medical Center.

## Burn Injury Research and Its Evidence Base

- What are the critical factors and barriers related to employment of individuals with burn injury
- What are some interventions or best practices that VR practitioners can utilize to support burn survivors in returning to work?
- What are key issues that VR practitioners should consider in supporting clients with burn injuries in seeking and maintaining competitive employment?
- And finally what are the gaps in the research literature and what does future research need to focus more on?

## 1. What is the research and its evidence base on employment for individuals with burn injury?

- 31 publications listed in Pub Med since 1989
- *Return to work after burn injury: a systematic review.*  
[\*J Burn Care Res.\* 2012 Jan-Feb;33\(1\):101-9.](#)
  - 216 articles identified
  - 26 determined to meet inclusion criteria
    - Mean age: 33.6 years
    - mean burn size: 18.9 %TBSA
    - 41 months post-burn: 72% of previously employed participants returned to some form of work

## 2. What are critical factors related to employment of individuals with burn injury?

- Misunderstanding about post burn disability status
- Employer inflexibility with transition to full time duties
  - Part time position
  - Light duty opportunities
- Access to mental health support for PTSD & depression
- Pending litigation
- Lack of communication between the treating burn team & the employer

### 3. What barriers preclude burn survivors from returning to work?

- *Employment outcomes after burn injury: a comparison of those burned at work and those burned outside of work.*  
[J Burn Care Res.](#) 2011; 32(2):294-301.
  - For those burned at work:
    - pain (72%), neurologic problems (62%), psychiatric problems (53%);
  - For those burned outside of work:
    - pain (63%), neurologic problems (59%), impaired mobility (54%)



### 3. What barriers preclude burn survivors from returning to work? (cont.)

- *Barriers to return to work after burn injuries.*  
[Arch Phys Med Rehabil.](#) 2007;88(12 Suppl 2):S50-6.
  - Early after injury (up to 1 year):
    - Physical & wound issues
  - Long term disability:
    - Working conditions (temperature, humidity, safety) & psychosocial factors (nightmares, flashbacks, appearance concerns)

#### 4. What interventions or best practices can VR practitioners use to support burn survivors in returning to work?

- Proactive education
  - Patients & families
  - Employers
- Facilitation
  - Voluminous paperwork
- Coordination
  - Physicians, therapists, employers, case managers

## 5. What are key issues that VR practitioners should consider in supporting clients to return to work after burn injury?

- Functional issues
  - Non-healed wounds
  - Range of motion limitations
  - Endurance
- Psychological issues
  - Depression
  - PTSD
  - Appearance
- Technological opportunities for outreach to patients in rural communities
- Language & cultural issues

## 6. What are the gaps in the literature base and research on return to work after burn injury?

- It is a wide open field!
- Late burn outcomes that impact work years after injury

## Individuals with burn injuries returning to work

- Burn injuries can create cosmetic disfigurements and physical and mental impairments.
  - American Burn Association ([www.ameriburn.org](http://www.ameriburn.org))  
Burn Treatment facts for 2013:
    - 450,000 persons are medically treated for burn injuries each year
    - 40,000 persons are hospitalized for burns each year.
    - 4,300 persons die from burn injuries each year.

## Individuals with burn injuries returning to work (Continued)

- Eligibility for Special Education under IDEA
- Eligibility for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income
- Eligibility for Medicaid and Medicare
- Eligibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504
  - The ADA defines disability as a “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity.”
  - The ADA also protects persons who are “regarded as having an impairment,” including persons with a “cosmetic disfigurement.”

## What are the eligibility criteria for burn survivors to receive VR support?

- Eligibility for Vocational Rehabilitation
  - Under the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, an “Individual with a disability” means an individual Who has a “physical or mental impairment” and whose “impairment constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment,” and Who can “benefit in terms of an employment outcome from the provision of vocational rehabilitation services.” 34 CFR 361.5(a)(28)
- Most significant disability criteria
- Significant disability criteria

## What percentage of burn survivors typically make up a counselor's caseload?

- Persons with burn Injuries constitute a relatively small portion of persons seeking vocational rehabilitation services
- Burn Types
  - 43% flame
  - 34% scald
  - 9% contact
  - 4% electrical
  - 3% chemical
  - 7% other



## What are the critical factors related to employment of individuals with burn injuries?

- Physical Impact
  - Vision
  - Hearing
  - Orthopedic
  - Respiratory
- Psychological Impact
  - Cognitive
  - Depression
  - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Anxiety

## What approaches do VR agencies use to support employment of burn survivors?

- Transferable Skills
- Grief and loss
- Career counseling
- Assistive technology
- Rehabilitation services

## What additional information could be added to researcher discussions about critical factors that impact burn survivors' capacity to return to work?

- Individualized Plan for Employment
- Each person is a unique individual, and each burn injury is different.
- The “individualized plan for employment” requires a “comprehensive assessment to determine the unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice, including the need for supported employment, of the eligible individual.”
- 34 CFR 361.5(a)(6)

How can research help advance the field regarding support and treatment of persons with burn injuries to better assist them in finding and maintaining competitive employment?

- Designing research is difficult because of the relatively small number of persons with burn injuries, coupled with the unique aspects of each individual and each burn injury
- The large number of returning veterans with burn injuries from improvised explosive devices may result in advances in medical treatment and rehabilitation

## 1. What has been the experience of a VR counselor in supporting burn survivors to return to work?

- Challenging - Rewarding
- Early intervention is critical
- Team approach to include –
  - Patient
  - Family
  - Physician – Burn Center MD and PCP
  - Physical and Occupational Therapists
  - Psychologists
  - Employer
  - Case manager – Insurer and DVR
- Do not wait until “fixed and stable”

- ## 2. How can VR practitioners use the research and literature to support burn survivors to return to work?
- Recognize that ‘one size does not fit all’
  - Majority of previously employed survivors return to work (RTW)
  - Issues can be complex – especially for the previously unemployed
  - Successful RTW begins with the evaluation of the client’s work abilities and readiness for work
  - Work accommodations after burn injury are often simple, durable, and inexpensive

- ### 3. What are some important suggestions for VR practitioners who support burn survivors to return to work?
- Assess for work readiness
    - Identify barriers
      - Ask “what is preventing you from working?”
    - Evaluate for ability and *not* for disability
      - Survivors often underestimate their abilities and RTW options
  - Identify community resources to address medical/psychological/functional issues to enhance employability

#### 4. What do VR practitioners need to help them support burn survivors to return to work?

- Access to experienced burn care specialists
- Access to programs and services –
  - Physical Capacity Evaluations, Work Conditioning/Hardening Programs
- Knowledge of occupation and workplace factors
  - Job analysis must be individualized
    - Conversation with employer or onsite evaluation
    - Review with the client



#### 4. What do VR practitioners need to help them support burn survivors to return to work? (cont'd.)

- Employers/business community who are invested
- Knowledge of burn sequela –
  - ↓ ROM (range of motion) and deconditioning
  - Pain and Itching
  - Psychosocial issues
  - Scarring

# Practice Guidelines

## How can practice guidelines help VR practitioners to support burn survivors to return to work?

- With only 2 reported U.S. burn-centered vocational counselors, best practice guidelines are essential for individuals who assist burn patients with return to work issues.

## How can practice guidelines help VR practitioners to support burn survivors to return to work? (cont.)

- VR practice guidelines would –
  - identify key factors and processes relevant to burn survivors
  - assist in determining if return to work is possible or if retraining is required
  - provide recommendations for employment re-entry
  - guide the evaluation with vocational planning
- VR recommendations should draw specific conclusions based on the original evaluation purpose and question(s)

## What type of information should the practice guidelines include?

- When a patient is ready to Return to Work?
- Details about the process of Returning to Work?
  - Employer Responsibilities
  - Patient Responsibilities
- Disability Benefits and Insurance options

### Northwest Regional Burn Model System

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Clinical Care](#) [Research Projects](#) [Publications](#) [Consumer Info](#) [Return to Work](#) [FAQs](#) [Contact Us](#)

Home

#### Return to Work

- Home
- Am I Ready to Return to Work?
- How do I Go About Returning to Work?
- Employer's Responsibilities
- Disability Benefits and Insurance
- Employment Research at the UW Burn Injury Model System



The Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (MSKTC) and NWRBMS invite you to watch this new video:

#### Return to Work After Burn Injury

##### Welcome!

Returning to work is an important phase of recovery after burn injury. Working has many rewards besides income—it can give you a sense of purpose and confidence, provide social opportunities, help your physical and emotional recovery, and improve your overall quality of life and sense of well-being.

Now that you are thinking about returning to work there are many issues to consider. This website is a tool to help you think about, get ready for and return to or find a work situation that is comfortable for you.

- Am I ready to return to work?
- How do I go about returning to work?
- What are my employer's responsibilities?
- What disability benefits and insurance are available if I can't go back to work for a while?



<http://burnrehab.washington.edu/work>

## What type of information should the practice guidelines include? (cont.)

- PROCESSES to follow when evaluating a client's abilities
- FACTORS to consider
  - Related to burn sequelae
  - Employment options
  - Workplace environment
- INDIVIDUAL perception of abilities and perceived barriers

Stergiou-Kita M, & Grigorovich A. *J Occup Rehabil* 2013  
Esselman PC. *Arch Phys Med Rehabil* 2007

## Who should be involved in developing the practice guidelines?

- Experts in burn vocational counseling
  - VR counselors
  - State Agencies: Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Burn providers (surgeons or physiatrists)
- Patients (e.g. The Phoenix Society)
- Regulatory representatives (e.g. workman's compensation - L&I - organizations)

## Who should be involved in developing the practice guidelines? (cont'd.)

- Burn survivors and family members
- Medical team
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors
- Case Managers (Worker's Compensation, DSHS, DVR)
- Other RTW coordinators (Occupational Nurse consultants)
- Employers (workplace safety officers, HR)
- The Phoenix Society (national burn survivor organization) <http://www.phoenix-society.org>



## Who should be involved in developing the practice guidelines? (cont'd.)

- Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI)
  - Identify and discuss field-initiated topics of importance to the public rehabilitation program.
  - Develop materials which can be used by state VR agencies and others concerned about staff development in rehabilitation.
  - Publish and disseminate the materials widely to persons who provide rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities.
  - <http://www.iriforum.org/>

## Wrapping Up

***Thank you for participating!***

We invite you to:

- Provide your input on today's webcast
- Share your thoughts on future webcasts topics
- Participate in the Community of Practice to continue the dialogue
- PLEASE CONTACT US:

**[ktdrr@sedl.org](mailto:ktdrr@sedl.org)**

*Please fill out the brief evaluation form:*

[www.surveygizmo.com/s3/1797360/Burn-Injury-Eval](http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/1797360/Burn-Injury-Eval)

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