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Major study aims to improve workers' compensation in Australia

In an Australian first, a Monash University-led study will partner with people who have lived experience of a workers' compensation claim in order to design better systems.

[Professor Alex Collie](#) from Monash University's School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine will lead the [Australian Research Council](#)-funded [Workers' Voice](#) project in partnership with injured workers and other experts.

Each year more than [half a million Australians](#) are injured or become ill at work. Thirty-one percent of them make a workers' compensation claim, resulting in at least 1.9 million weeks of lost work costing the economy [\\$28.6 billion each year](#).

Every state and territory in Australia has a workers' compensation scheme. There are also three national schemes for Commonwealth government workers, Defence Force personnel and maritime workers.

Professor Collie said there was now strong evidence that Australia's workers' compensation systems were structured and operated in a way that could cause problems for injured workers.

"Many studies in Australia and internationally show that a lot of people find workers' compensation stressful and complex, and that for some people this contributes to slower recovery and significant distress," he said.

"These studies suggest that it is the way workers' compensation schemes operate that can lead to problems. The sector has a history of treating injured workers as claims to be managed, rather than as vulnerable people in need of support."

Workers' Voice: Harnessing lived experience to redesign Australia's workers' compensation systems will engage workers with physical and psychological injury and illness, and their support networks.

Researchers will work with workers and their supporters to design a workers' compensation system that reflects their experiences, views and preferences.

"We think that workers with an injury or illness, their family and friends, have a unique and very valuable experience of workers' compensation," Professor Collie said. "This experience should be heard and have greater weight in the way systems are designed and the way they operate."

The research team will use a technique called participatory system modelling to develop and test new design and delivery approaches. The results will provide a vision for a new approach to workers' compensation that supports the recovery and return to work of Australians with work-related injury or illness.

“Most of our workers’ compensation schemes were designed in the 1980s,” Professor Collie said. “The world of work, and the types of injury and illness we see at work, have changed fundamentally. But our systems haven’t kept pace. This project is about re-imagining workers’ compensation for the future.

“Because workers haven’t been involved in designing compensation schemes before, we don’t really know what solutions will be developed. That is a really exciting part of this project.”

The study also involves the Australian Centre for Justice Innovation, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Waterloo, as well as numerous injured worker support groups and networks around Australia.

Professor Collie is confident governments will listen to the study findings. “Some of our largest workers’ compensation schemes have been under enormous financial pressure, and are struggling to get people back to work,” he said. “To manage their budgets, governments have been cutting benefits and restricting access to these schemes.

“This short-term, knee-jerk reaction to financial pressure creates as many problems as it solves. A better way to improve a system and make it sustainable is to listen carefully to people with direct experience of that system. The Workers’ Voice Project provides an opportunity to do just that.”

The Workers’ Voice project is expected to run until 2026, with major findings released periodically, beginning in early 2024.

More information at: www.workersvoice.com.au

About Australia’s workers’ compensation system

Australia has a complex and fragmented workers’ compensation policy and service delivery landscape. There are 11 main systems, one in each state and territory and three at the Commonwealth level. They share common objectives of (1) supporting the return to work of injured workers; and (2) delivering services and support at the least cost to society (i.e. financial sustainability). Nearly one-quarter of a million Australians make a workers’ compensation claim each year, with more than 100,000 of these being for more than 5 days off work.

Case study available upon request

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