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The Ageing Australian Workforce

Background

Australia's population and its workforce are ageing. More than 80 per cent of Australian workforce growth between 1998 and 2016 is projected to be in those over 45 years.¹ The Australian Government recognises that mature age labour force participation is important for Australia's future economic growth prospects. It has subsequently introduced a number of initiatives, including practical measures such as retraining and re-skilling, to boost mature age labour force participation. As a result of this, Australia's mature age work participation rate will continue to increase over the next few decades.

Ageing workers face specific occupational health and safety concerns. These include decreased physical capacity, fatigue, increased rates of musculoskeletal disorders and greater incidence of disease.² It is important to note that while age-related deterioration in mental and physical function are inevitable, they do not necessarily lead to incapacity or reduced performance and productivity at work. In some ways older workers are the most skilled and most productive employees, but in others they are the most vulnerable.³

Older workers (over 45 years) have been observed to have more severe work-related injuries, more severe outcomes of injury (such as longer rehabilitation and greater lost work time), and a higher rate and cost of injury than younger workers.^{3,4} However, the literature reveals uncertainty about the relationship between age and occupational accidents. The most common finding is that accident frequency tends to decrease as age increases.⁵ The inconsistency in findings appears to relate to a number of confounders (for e.g., large scale studies vs. intra-occupational studies or differences in 'injury' inclusion criteria [i.e., injury vs. disease and various injury types] and differing age-related accident characteristics [i.e., accident type, body part injured etc.]).

The Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC) recommends strategies to minimise age-related problems and help older workers maintain their health and productivity, and begins with young workers, continuing throughout their working lives. Physiotherapists can help with the early identification of signs of cumulative strain or degenerative change and guide the implementation of appropriate strategies to reduce these effects and their future impacts on capacity, productivity and health.

There are a number of reasons why older workers with diminished physical or cognitive function may continue to work safely and effectively as they age:

- They have strong social support and coping skills;
- The work duties or work environment are modified;
- Most jobs do not require performance at full capacity even for older workers, although in general older people work closer to their physical limits than younger workers;

- While various physical and cognitive capabilities decline with age, there is great individual variation in these normative trends;
- Older workers often compensate for age-related change with strategies and skills related to their experience and expertise, although the relationships are complex and the literature equivocal.

Assessment of an individual worker's ability to meet specific job demands may be appropriate to quantify risk, identify limitations and adequately manage injury risks.³ This should include ergonomic assessment as poor ergonomics has been found to be the main work-related cause of premature decline of work ability.⁶ ASCC recommends that 'physical, mental and social work environments be adjusted to accommodate changes associated with ageing'.⁷

'Health and well-being promotion in the workplace will reduce the impact of risk factors and slow the changes associated with ageing... Examples of programs include healthy life seminars, fitness programs, weight loss programs, supported access to gym facilities, hearing and other specific health testing, assistance to quit smoking and access to annual flu vaccinations.'⁸ Flexible work hours and work task design may improve workforce participation, productivity and safety.

Physiotherapy and the Ageing Australian Workforce

Physiotherapists are able to positively impact on the health outcomes and productivity of working Australians by working with individual clients of working age, workgroups and employers through:

- Injury prevention strategies including risk assessment and management
- Assisting with injury and disease management (including self-management)
- Educating employers in the management of an ageing workforce
- Dealing with the co-morbidities associated with injury, disease and age-related functional change
- Assisting the early identification of workplace or individual factors that are likely to lead to accelerated degeneration, injury or disease
- Advising ergonomic improvements such as job/task design
- Improving awareness of the benefits of activity, exercise, health/wellness and training programs
- Developing, implementing and monitoring such health promoting services and programs
- Addressing the symptoms of acute and chronic work and non work-related injury and disease
- Assessing the work ability of employees to assist with job matching.
- Physiotherapists have the necessary expert knowledge and skills to prevent and manage the co-morbidities and complications of injury, disease and age-related

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- Physiotherapists are ideally placed to identify functional limitations at an early stage of development and to implement corrective strategies that prevent deterioration of work ability and health.
- Physiotherapists are ideally placed to advise individuals, employers and Government about strategies to prevent injury and maintain the work ability of individuals and work groups, including older Australians.
- Physiotherapists offer a wide range of services to older working Australians with age-related deterioration in function, or who have or who are at risk of developing the effects of injury and disease (both acute and chronic).
- Strategies to minimise age-related problems and help older workers maintain their health and productivity, begins with young workers and continues throughout their working lives.
- APA specialist and titled Occupational Health Physiotherapists have a high level of expertise and experience for assisting individuals and employers to identify potential health and safety problems and develop, implement and manage programs to maintain the work ability and health of ageing Australian workers.
- The workplace affords the best community opportunity for health promotion and maintenance in working adults.⁹

References:

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