



Peer Support Service newsletter

Bringing together RCN members affected by injury, ill health or disability to share experiences and knowledge

Winter 2016

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- How employers can support disabled employees
- Help for members experiencing menopause
- How to appeal against benefit changes
- How you can be a part of Disability History Month



Editor's welcome

Vivienne Ferris welcomes readers and gives an overview of what's inside this issue

I am pleased to introduce this edition of the RCN's Peer Support Service newsletter and hope you find it helpful. As disabled people continue to face changes, such as those highlighted by Ian on page 4, it's important that we try to embrace these changes by using the excellent resources provided by Member Support Services.

It's encouraging to see more being spoken about in the media around hidden disabilities. A high percentage of the general public still perceive the word disability in relation to a wheelchair. I would encourage those who can to challenge obvious discrepancies in the Equality Act 2010 (or Disability Discrimination Act for those of us in Northern Ireland). It is a sad fact that it takes individuals to hold service

providers to account despite it being ingrained in law.

My daughter, also a nurse, is now disabled following illness but having watched the regular discrimination I faced, including abuse in public, she decided not let these ignorant parts of society allow her to feel the way I felt. In doing so, she has been able to help herself much sooner and while she is not immune to comments made by others, she is determined to try to do as much as she can within the limitations of her disability. I would encourage any member requiring aids or the help of others to use them as soon as they are needed.

Finally, I hope you enjoy this issue and would ask members to share their experiences with others. We're all in this together. Contact us with your views and stories: peer.support@rcn.org.uk

Vivienne Ferris
PSS Newsletter Editor



How can we help you?

Holly Chadd, Information and Project Co-Ordinator, RCN Member Support Services, talks about how supporting disabled workers can be a grey area for employers

A recent survey conducted by Reed, the employment specialists, in collaboration with Disability Rights UK has revealed that employers have concerns about the logistics of supporting disabled employees, despite recognising their valuable contribution to the workplace.

At a time when the Government has committed to halving the disability employment gap this, and other recent research, suggest that employers are still unclear about how to assist people with impairments. Health care workers in particular must feel supported to discuss their requirements, whether it be awareness training for staff, provision of equipment or modifications to the work environment or working hours. They must then have confidence that reasonable adjustments will be implemented and sustained.

Positive change

How can RCN members promote the benefits of work to their disabled patients if they aren't able to experience this for themselves? As with the RCN's Healthy Workplace, Healthy You initiative, it is essential that we are all able to live the values that we uphold and essential to the employment and retention of staff with impairments if we want to see positive change in this area.



That is why the Peer Support Service is developing guidance to assist members who need to have conversations about their impairments at work. You can read what we have done so far by visiting the Peer Support Services section at www.rcn.org.uk

Tell us

More importantly, you can contribute your own experiences to benefit your peers. Do you have a disabled staff network, a disability leave policy, adaptations to a work role or student work placement? Whether you have

direct experience of remaining in employment with an impairment or your experience is as a manager, colleague or RCN rep, don't keep it to yourself. Let us know what's worked for you. Together we can build a resource that celebrates and promotes best practice. Email peer.support@rcn.org.uk

Don't forget – you should always call RCN Direct 0345 772 6100 for advice if you are experiencing workplace issues including sickness review meetings and discrimination.

Changing times

Smita Dancklefsen is passionate about breaking taboos around the menopause



I have been through some difficult times at work as a result of the symptoms of menopause. I'm delighted that the RCN now has a group as part of the PSS for women experiencing this life change.

My dream is for the menopause to be understood and respected by colleagues, employers and everyone. I want women to have a safe, supportive

environment to discuss their issues and together break the taboo.

If you would like to join me, email peer.support@rcn.org.uk

The RCN has guidance available to support RCN representatives with colleagues going through the menopause. View the guidance at <http://tinyurl.com/zc5hjyj>

Working towards a future

Moira Hill is a member of the PSS and speaks about changes the Government is making to halve the disability employment gap by 2020



I have had widespread chronic pain and associated chronic fatigue since 2005. Living with any long-term health condition or disability can be extremely difficult, complex and at times unpredictable as symptoms can fluctuate. My life has been affected significantly and in some ways has changed beyond recognition. To onlookers I am conscious I often look “okay” as my disability is somewhat “invisible”. One thing that has helped me to cope with the changes I have faced, particularly in my working life, has been my involvement with the RCN Peer Support Service.

Bridging the gap

For people with long-term health conditions or disabilities to live rich, meaningful lives it is important they have access to the specialist advice and support they need. Undoubtedly people with long-term health problems and disabilities are experiencing the direct effects of cuts being made to health and social care budgets and the impact of the welfare reforms. In light of this, and the Government’s aim to halve the disability employment gap by 2020, looking carefully at how health affects employment is extremely timely.

It is important to obtain a balanced view of the work taking place to make positive changes to the lives of disabled and chronically ill adults. It is also useful to highlight where someone with a disability or long-term health condition may be able to make changes, which could improve their chances of employability.

Government promises

The Government has recognised that despite many people with disabilities and long-term health conditions wanting to work, there remain barriers, challenges and inequality.

As part of the 2015 Spending Review, the Government announced it would increase spending on supporting disabled people into work, and replace the current national employment programmes in 2017 with a new “work and health programme”. This is intended to reform the support available to people with long-term health conditions and disabilities, to help them get into work.

In addition to these changes ministers spoke of their aim to improve the links between health services and employment support, recognising that

“timely access to health treatments can help people return to work quicker”.

So at this time of uncertainty it is necessary to keep looking forward. This is where I come full circle and look at the benefits of the Peer Support Service. While the evidence shows there are established benefits when peer support programmes are used to support health outcomes and recovery; with benefits including improved self-esteem and self-management, and associated improvements in employment, the use of peer support in supporting employment outcomes specifically is in its early stages.

Peer support at work

Reassuringly, the Work Foundation and Disability Rights UK found that while “evidence was limited, it was indicated there was considerable potential in the use of peer support” in the area of employment. While the direct results of the evidence showed improvements in areas such as starting work, job retention and reduced sickness absence, it is important to also look closely at the indirect results seen, including improved confidence and self-esteem, as these changes will have the impact of improving the person’s overall quality of life and chances of employment.

As a member of the RCN PSS you receive advice, support and empathy from others who understand how chronic illness and disability can affect your life, including your work; this support is invaluable. Many people have knowledge, skills and experience which can, when shared, change someone’s life – the value of peer support should never be underestimated. I have no doubt there are major benefits to its use in the area of employment support, and I can only hope that the good work carried out by disabled people’s organisations, employers and all interested parties is truly reflected when a Green Paper eventually arrives.



Your right to challenge

RCN Welfare Adviser Ian King on how to appeal against changes to certain benefits

The Welfare Rights and Guidance Service has seen a recent increase in appeals casework for members being reassessed from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to Personal Independence Payment (PIP), with some members losing benefit altogether and others moving to a lower rate of PIP than they were receiving in DLA. This is due to the change to the scoring descriptors which give rise to entitlement.

If you disagree with the decision that's been made about your PIP claim you can challenge it. You should do so within one month of the decision.

You can challenge the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) decision about PIP if:

- you didn't get it
- you got a lower rate than you expected
- you think your award isn't long enough.

Apply for mandatory reconsideration

The best way to apply for a reconsideration is to write a letter to the DWP explaining why you disagree with the decision. You need to make sure that the DWP receives the letter within one month of the decision. The decision date is on your letter – it isn't the date you received it.

Your decision letter will say that you can call the DWP to ask for a reconsideration, but it is best to have everything in writing. If you choose to call, make sure you follow up the call with a letter.

You need to give specific reasons why you disagree with the decision. Use your decision letter, statement of reasons and medical assessment report to make a note of each of the statements you disagree with and why. Give facts, examples and medical evidence (if available) to support what you're saying.

Late responses

If you've missed the one-month deadline, you can still apply for a reconsideration, as long as it's within 13 months of the decision. You'll need to give good reason for being late. The DWP doesn't have to consider a late application, so try to send your letter as soon as you can. Explain in the letter why your application is late, as well as why you disagree with their decision.

The DWP doesn't have to make the decision within a specific timescale and sometimes it can take several months to get your decision letter. This letter is

called a "mandatory reconsideration notice". You'll be sent two copies and will need to send one off if you need to go to the next stage of appeal.

High success rate

If the DWP changes its decision, you'll start getting your PIP payment straight away. Your payment for PIP will start from the date of the original decision. If you're challenging the rate you've been put on and the DWP changes the decision, you'll be paid the difference for the time it takes them to make the decision.

Fewer decisions are revised at the reconsideration stage, but more are changed after the second stage of the challenge – if your mandatory reconsideration is turned down you can appeal to a tribunal. Recent statistics reveal that 63% of PIP appeals are successful.

If you need some help with your appeal, contact your RCN Direct on **0345 772 6100** and you will be referred to the Welfare Rights and Guidance Service. Try to get in touch straight away – you might have to wait for an appointment and you only have a month to send your letter in.

Disability History Month

Public Lecture, Thursday 8 December, RCN HQ, 20 Cavendish Square, London



The RCN was born 100 years ago. Nurses, politicians and philanthropists alike realised their shared vision for a platform to regulate and progress the practice of nursing. This early idea grew to be a strong fellowship to which nurses quickly gravitated.

It was essential to our founders that the College offered support for the general welfare of all members. Many nurses had sustained injuries, physical and psychological, during service in the First World War. The College established rest homes where members could relax and regain their health, and benefactor Lady

Cowdray also set up pensions for which disabled members could apply.

Nursing today remains a wide-ranging and sometimes risky profession where the potential for developing an illness or disability through work can be high. In the RCN's centenary year, we celebrate the achievements of nurses and health care workers with disabilities over the last 100 years, and consider the ways in which support for all disabled people might be improved.

Book your free tickets online at: <https://dhm2016.eventbrite.co.uk>

Those unable to attend will be able to read about the event in the next newsletter and watch a recording of the lecture online. Our guest speaker this year will be writer, poet and artist Penny Pepper.

Get involved

We need RCN Peer Support members to represent the group and document Penny's talk for the next newsletter.

Tell us why it should be you by emailing peer.support@rcn.org.uk by **18th November**. If you are selected, some support with travel costs will be provided.