

## More control, fewer sickies

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(Medical Xpress) -- Employees take fewer sickies if they have more control over their jobs, according to a new study.

As Western Australia struggles with a skilled labour shortage, a researcher and orthopaedic surgeon has published important findings on long work absences due to lower back pain.

Associate Professor Markus Melloh, from the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research and The University of Western Australia, was lead author on the internationally collaborative report: "[Predictors of Sickness Absence](#) with a New Episode of Lower Back Pain in Primary Care".

He found the best way to prevent long absences from work (up to six months) due to lower back pain was to give employees a sense of empowerment and to ensure that their GPs followed up with them on a regular basis after their first appointment.

Associate Professor Melloh said patients with first-time lower back pain should see their doctor again after six weeks, otherwise their risk of long-term sickness absence could be missed by their GP and interventions, such as modifying their work situation, would not be implemented.

The study showed that workers with high job control had fewer days of [sick leave](#) when suffering from a new episode of back pain than others with lower job control, he said.

"For the first time, the risk of prolonged sick leave for people complaining of back pain can be averted by simple short-term measures such as talking to their supervisor, changing work hours and modifying work breaks. Long-term measures include greater empowerment within a job, such as more decision-making by the worker.

"Sickness absence due to an ongoing pain condition is a hot topic in Australia and throughout the world for a number of reasons," Associate Professor Melloh said.

"Australia has a shortage of skilled workers. Prolonged absence may lead to unemployment and reduced employability of a worker, and also indirect [health care costs](#) increase when workers are absent for too long."

The study monitored 310 patients who went to their GPs with back pain and took days off work. They were interviewed during the initial visit then followed up at three, six and 12 weeks and six months. At six months, 164 people were still participating and seven per cent were still on sick leave.

Associate Professor Melloh said back pain was a very important issue in Australia because the back was the most common site of pain for people of working age, from young to middle-aged adults.

The research has recently been presented at the World Forum for Spine Research in Helsinki.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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