Towards Best Practices of Functional Assessment (FA)

On September 25-28th, 2002, eighty-seven stakeholders participated in an interactive participatory conference called *Functional Assessment: A Time for Consensus, A Time for Change* at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. These stakeholders represented the 'whole system' of people involved in all aspects of FA practices including those who experience, conduct, interpret and use FAs with injured workers. They set out to:

- Develop a common understanding of the issues related to functional assessment (FA) practices.
- Develop an awareness of evidence that relates to FA issues.
- Develop strategies for facilitating an evidence-based FA process that promotes excellence and accountability.

Through a series of exercises in various mixes of stakeholder groups, participants explored the present context of FAs through reflections on the past and global perspectives, and identified a range of potential actions for a better future. Activities culminated in the commitment of many participants to Action Groups that continued to work after the conference in order to make the better future become a reality. The research team provided on-going support to these groups to facilitate successful completion of their objectives. At a one-day follow-up meeting (April 9th, 2003), these stakeholders discussed strategies to further the Action Group's work and formally called themselves the Functional Assessment Network.

Background:

Considerable variation exists in approach, protocol, cost, reporting, and utility of FAs. Diverse stakeholders use FAs for a multiplicity of purposes, only some of which can be supported by evidence. Many decisions about an individual's return to work, entitlement to benefits, and access to supports and rehabilitation services, rely on these FAs. To deliver evidence-based services, providers and users of FAs must be research informed and continually reflective of their practice.

In 1999, Susan Strong and a team of researchers received funding from the Research Advisory Council of the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) to document functional assessment practices in southern Ontario and examine their use by employers and the WSIB. This two year FA Study documented the similarities and differences of current FA practices, gathered worker-provider-user perspectives, and examined influential factors. What went on before and after the assessment was identified as just as important as during the assessment itself. The McMaster study proposed a model of an optimal FA process which became a starting point for a wide-ranging discussion of issues.

In 2001, additional funding was obtained from WSIB to facilitate the transfer of what is considered "best practice" for FAs, and evaluate a modified Future Search as a method of research transfer and utilization. Future Search, a large-group change method, is a participatory collaborative framework that enables diverse, at times adversarial, stakeholders to appreciate differences of opinions and values, arrive at a common understanding, collectively gain new knowledge and find new solutions and make informed plans. The success of this process is being evaluated through telephone surveys, in-depth interviews, and the Action Group's activities.

Outcomes:

- Guidelines and discussion papers for workers, users and providers of FAs
- Fact Sheets, pamphlets and other educational materials
- Decision-making tools (e.g., algorithm for deciding if and when to proceed with an FA)
- An evaluation of a modified Future Search as a method of research transfer and utilization
- Development of a community of stakeholders bridging all aspects of FA delivery and use who are informed about FAs and taking actions to improve practice

This information has been provided to by the Functional Assessment Network (FAN)
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