**Workfare and health**

*There might just be benefits*

John Major, the British prime minister, created a political storm recently when he seemed in a speech to be supporting the idea of workfare—requiring the unemployed to work in exchange for benefits. The political right is attracted by workfare because it resents the idea that people might be paid by the state to do nothing. The left, in its turn, is appalled that people who are thrown out of work through no fault of their own should then be required to undertake slave labour to qualify for the benefits that are due to them. This polarisation causes the debate to stall, but in a world where unemployment is unlikely to fall fast or far and where so much work needs doing the idea may be worth exploring further. One way to examine the issue is to consider the possible effect on the health of unemployed people.

The harmful effects of unemployment on mental and physical health are well established, although much less work has been done on the effectiveness of various interventions. Re-employment has been shown to produce measurable improvements in health, but I know of no study of the effects of joining a workfare scheme. Yet we do know—particularly from the work of Jahoda and Warr—the factors associated with unemployment that seem to damage health. By examining the relation between these factors and workfare we may gain some insight into the likely effects on health of joining a workfare scheme. This is a poor substitute for a randomised controlled trial, but when the problem is so huge and immediate we need to gain insights where we can.

The main factor that links unemployment and poor health is poverty, and workfare will do nothing here unless people are paid more than they would receive on benefit. Other factors identified by Jahoda and Warr as important for health may, however, be provided by workfare: these include a time structure to the day, social contacts outside the family, a sense of doing things with others, regularity, and "traction" (the quality that leads to the maxim "If you want something done quickly ask a busy person"). Whether workfare would provide other factors they identified is less certain. Thus the best employment provides purpose, social status, and a chance to develop new skills. If well organised, workfare might provide these needs, although the social status of being on workfare would probably be as bad as, if not worse than, that of being unemployed. Similarly, workfare might expose people to the stigma and frequent humiliations that are damaging to health.

Thus workfare might present some potential benefits to health, and it might also reduce the chances of an unemployed person becoming unemployed because of prolonged unemployment. But perhaps the greatest fear about workfare is that it might reduce the political spur to create jobs and lead to an army of people working in poorly paid conditions. Yet even this issue is complicated because the long term answer to the health problems associated with unemployment is probably to remove the distinction between paid employment and work. At the moment paid employment (even if it's making rubber ducks for export) brings status and income, whereas work, which we all do to keep going and may well do voluntarily in our communities, carries neither income nor status. As the total amount of paid employment relative to the working population diminishes then we must either break down the barrier between employment and work or be condemned to live in a society permanently divided between the employed and growing numbers of the unemployed.

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