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Introduction

Thanks in large measure to advances in medical technology, millions of people are living longer and more comfortably while they cope with chronic illnesses. This is certainly an encouraging trend, but, at the same time, it has created unique challenges for the systems that provide services for people with disabilities. As growing numbers of children with chronic diseases graduate from public schools and enter adulthood, vocational rehabilitation professionals will be called upon more frequently to assist them in their pursuit of independent life roles. On the other end of the career continuum, people are putting off retirement until later in life than ever before, a phenomenon that has substantially increased the number of American workers who develop age-related illnesses (e.g. diabetes, arthritis, cancer, heart disease).

As these patterns continue, they converge to pose major implications for the vocational rehabilitation (VR) process. On the one hand, career guidance, training and placement assistance stand to be in heavy demand from youths with chronic illnesses seeking to make the transition to competitive careers. On the other, post-employment services, such as self-advocacy training, consultation with employers and planning for reasonable accommodations, will be more actively sought by members of the ever-aging workforce who acquire mid-career illnesses. Hence, it is more important than ever for rehabilitation professionals to acquaint themselves with the often debilitating effects of chronic illnesses — effects that go far beyond the medical symptoms of each disease.

Specifically, the psychological uncertainty that accompanies an unpredictable, sometimes pro-

gressive illness makes it difficult for the person to participate in the planful, outcome-based VR process. Unlike static conditions, such as traumatic spinal cord injuries or congenital blindness, chronic illnesses bring a non-linear, fluctuating adjustment cycle that often leaves the person waiting for his or her next relapse rather than developing pro-active coping strategies.

To effectively meet the career development needs of people with chronic illnesses, rehabilitation professionals must (1) become familiar with the medical aspects of commonly reported diseases; (2) understand the psychological tolls that chronic illness exacts on the person and his or her significant others; (3) gauge the extent to which medical and psychological factors conjoin to impede the person's prospects for successful employment; and (4) develop knowledge of resources and model programs that can assist people with chronic illness in establishing and/or maintaining their careers. With that in mind, the purpose of this issue is to provide current information for practitioners and administrators to use as they are called upon to serve more people with chronic illnesses. Several articles treat the concept of chronic illness in general terms, whereas others focus on specific illness categories, such as multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, HIV/AIDS and diabetes mellitus. Readers will also note a balance among empirical, review, case study and descriptive 'best practice' articles. This variety of submissions was sought in consideration of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation's* diverse, interdisciplinary readership.

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