

IINJURED FISH HARVESTERS

Introduction

Commercial fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. Mortality data from a range of countries confirm the worldwide nature of this problem. The high rate of fatalities and injuries has led to a concerted attempt by national and international agencies to introduce regulations and training programs designed to improve safety in the industry. There is evidence that these measures have met with some success. However, a large number of fish harvesters continue to be injured in the industry every year. Those who are seriously injured have little prospect of alternative employment since they often live in small isolated fishing communities. Little is known about the challenges faced by these injured fish harvesters.

Aims of the Study

This study had four main aims:

1. to describe the character of the fish harvesters' work and the most common type of accidents and injuries;
2. to describe the impact of the injuries on the fish harvesters' everyday lives;
3. to describe the fish harvesters' experience of current support services;
4. to develop recommendations for improvements in support services for injured fish harvesters.

Research method

The Workplace Health and Safety Compensation Commission (WHSCC) identified from their records a total of 206 fish harvesters who were currently receiving extended earnings loss (EEL) benefits. These benefits are available for injured workers who are unable to re-enter the workforce or are unable to earn as much as they earned before their injury. A package of information about the project including a summary statement, a letter of support from the fish harvesters' union and another from the WHSCC was sent to these injured fish harvester. To maintain confidentiality, these packages were distributed by the WHSCC. A total of 35 fish harvesters replied indicating that they were interested in the study. These individuals were then contacted and a suitable time for the interview arranged, if possible. Nine potential participants were not able to take part in the study for various reasons leaving a final total of 26 participants who were interviewed. The participants were drawn from 22 communities around the island of Newfoundland and were drawn from both the in-shore and the deep-sea fishery. Individual interviews were held with the injured fish harvesters. They were conducted in the fish harvesters' homes. Each participant was initially invited to describe his or her entry into the fishing industry, their experiences of being a fish harvester, the accident or accidents, the impact of the consequent injury on their everyday lives, their dealings with workers' compensation system and other support services, and their overall thoughts on fishing and safety. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The findings are derived from this sub-sample who may not be fully representative of all injured fish harvesters. All but two of the participants were male; 15 had worked in the deepsea fishery and the rest in the inshore fishery; they ranged in age from 46 to 61 years and had been on disability benefit from 4 to 23 years. This report

does not provide the perspective of service providers and the various challenges they experience. Despite these caveats, the study provides an opportunity to identify the concerns expressed by injured fish harvesters and how they are managing disability in their lives.

Analyses

Each of the interviews was read and a broad coding scheme developed. The transcribed interviews were then entered into a text analysis software program that allowed a more detailed analysis of the interviews. A review of these codings identified a number of key themes. Following the analysis the major findings were reviewed and a series of recommendations developed. These were designed to address the concerns raised by the fish harvesters. Subsequently three regional meetings were convened at which the findings and recommendations from the study were presented to the study participants. A total of nine people participated in these group discussions. In addition, the findings were presented at a meeting with officials of the WHSCC. A number of suggestions were made by the participants at these meetings and these were integrated into the final report.

FINDINGS

Life as a Fish Harvester

Background

Fishing is a family and community concern. Fish harvesters grow up in a family and in a community where fishing is the dominant occupation and has been for generations. From an early age, they often have accompanied their father or other relative going fishing. The injured fish harvesters recalled that when they left school, often as early as 11 or 12 years of age, they started fishing. Some recalled participating in the seasonal fishery off Labrador and other parts of the province. Some tried in-shore fishing initially and then moved to the deep-sea. It was not unusual for those in the off-shore fishery to have tried work elsewhere but then, on return home, to have got work on a dragger. Thus for both types of fish harvesters, fishing was their primary experience of work. It was an occupation that many of them had inherited from their parents. Many said they found it difficult to imagine an alternative. It was also an occupation that was rooted in their community and in their traditions. For this reason, to be injured out of the industry was a very disorienting experience.

Being a Fish Harvester

All of the fish harvesters stressed the intense satisfaction they had gained from their work. There were several reasons for this satisfaction including the sense of freedom, the excitement, the connection with the sea, and the hard work. There was a certain resentment against what they considered was a popular stereotype of the lazy fisherman. The deep-sea fishery was well paid. Although the hours were long there was great satisfaction in getting well-paid for it. This was especially the case in communities where low incomes were more the norm. The deep-sea fishermen also enjoyed the camaraderie they felt with the other crew members; they were all in this together.

Comments

All of the injured fish harvesters had a very close attachment to the fishery. To understand the impact of injury on their lives it is necessary to connect it with the severing of their strong attachment to the industry. Their whole identity and lifestyle and that of their families were closely intertwined with the fishery. They went to sea at an early age with family members and they worked year round on different aspects of the fishery. They defined themselves as fish harvesters.

Accidents and Injuries

Type of accidents

The participants reported a variety of accidents. The most common types were slips and falls on the boat and on the wharf. Accidents involving equipment or machinery on the boat or onshore were often mentioned. Several of the deep-sea fishermen were injured when equipment or doors fell on them. This often happened in bad weather. Out at sea, with an unstable surface the fishermen often got into a rhythm of working that could lead to accidents.

Causes of accidents

The primary cause of accidents mentioned by the in-shore fish harvesters was the pace of work that many of them followed. The reason for this was that because of the seasonal system they had to maximize their catch within a short period. More recently, various quota systems have been introduced but previously it was a free-for-all once the fishing season opened. Those who worked as crew on the larger boats felt that the skipper often exerted undue pressure on the crew creating greater risk of accidents. Those in the shrimp boats referred to inexperienced crewmembers. These so-called 'greenhorns' often got in the way of more experienced crewmembers and created accidents especially when things got hectic out at sea. Despite this, there was little effort by skippers to improve the training of new crewmembers. Not surprisingly, in view of the high rate of slips and falls, the inshore fishermen often identified greasy decks as a major cause of accidents on boat. Coupled with the slippery decks was the weather that could change quickly, increasing the risk of accidents.

The deep-sea fishermen referred to the dangers of fishing in bad weather. The problem was that when they put to sea the weather might be fine but it could change rapidly. The fishermen felt that many skippers continued to fish in bad weather despite the dangers to their crew. Many of the dragger fishermen referred to the long hours they worked when out at sea. This meant that they were often tired at work and were more likely to be careless. The hours of work on board trawlers used to be very long, indeed some of the fishermen reported that they often had little time for sleep. Experience came with years of fishing at sea. But, conversely having inexperienced crew men could be a hazard. The challenge lay in hiring a balanced and experienced crew. The skipper was often a good judge but many times he was not involved in hiring. Fortunately, there had been improvements over the years and the development of a more professional fish harvester. The union played an important role in this change. The skipper played a central role on the deep-sea boats. Many of the injured draggers reported that the skippers were often harsh and uncaring for their crew. The attitude of the skipper was reflected in the overall operation and maintenance of the vessel.

Out at sea the fishing boat is constantly in motion. In order to do their work the fishermen have to hold their bodies in a certain way so as to maintain their balance. The

fishermen felt that this in itself could cause wear and tear on them physically. Related to this were the cramped working conditions many of the fishermen had to work in.

Comments

These findings confirm that the primary types of accident are those involving slips, falls and encounters with equipment and machinery that can occur both on board the ship and on the wharf. When the pace of work is relaxed and the weather is calm, such accidents can often be avoided. But the nature of the fishery is often frenetic and rushed which can increase the risk of accidents. However, even when completing the most routine task, e.g. getting on or off a boat, there is the risk of an accident occurring.

Both groups of fish harvesters also emphasized the role of the skippers who themselves were under considerable pressure to maximize the catch even in dangerous waters. There were many stories of careless or ruthless skippers whose main concern was the size of the catch rather than the safety of their crew. The skippers could potentially play a central role in reducing accidents in the industry.

Disabled Fish Harvesters

Impact of injury

Serious injuries had a major impact on the lives of the fish harvesters. The initial shock was followed by an open-ended period of readjustment. Most of the fish harvesters could vividly recall the injury they had incurred. They could recall the actual event and being informed that they could no longer fish. This initial shock was compounded by the realization that they could not go back to sea. These early days post-injury were described as unreal. For many of the fish harvesters, the shock continued for an extended period. The dramatic impact of the injury on the lives of the fish harvesters was due to a range of losses. These included

Loss of identity: In view of the strength of their association with the fishery it was not surprising that many of the fish harvesters felt that the loss of their identity and the whole lifestyle associated with the fishery was the most negative impact of being injured out of the industry.

Loss of purpose: A common feeling expressed by the fish harvesters was the loss of a purpose in their lives. Previously, their work gave their lives a sense of purpose but now they felt adrift.

Loss of physical ability: The fishermen had been proud of their physical prowess and their ability to perform a wide range of strenuous tasks with ease. Now they felt frustrated that even the most menial tasks took a lot of effort.

Loss of financial investment: There was the loss of daily routine and the frustration at the loss of considerable financial investment.

Loss of income: The limited income from Workers Compensation did not compensate for the loss of income they suffered as a result of the injury. The limited income support they currently received was inadequate especially since they needed extra support because their physical disability limited their ability to perform everyday tasks.

Loss of opportunity: Related to loss of income was the loss of opportunity. Many injured fish harvesters were particularly frustrated that they had been injured at that time in their career when they expected to make big gains.

Loss of family role: Further, the reduced income had a major impact on the lifestyle of the whole family. They could no longer play the breadwinner role in the family. This

meant they felt awkward with both their children and their partner. In addition, rather than being at work for most of the day he often found he was drawn into conflict with his wife and children.

The Disabled Life

The most common long-term impact was depression. Many of the fish harvesters felt very depressed. Some had sought treatment with little success. Several of the harvesters reported on-going pain. Often their sleep was severely disrupted. For some, their injury substantially limited the extent to which they could do anything. Instead, they spent lengthy periods lying on the sofa. Most of the in-shore fishermen reported the difficulty in establishing a new routine. Even the smallest task required considerable effort. A lot of time was spent watching television and reading newspapers or books for those who could read. Some of the men took up family or household responsibilities, e.g. taking children to school and doing some domestic chores. The injured women fish harvesters attempted to develop their domestic skills but felt restricted because of their injury. Some had family or friends in their community and they met with them regularly. Some tried to maintain social relations with colleagues in the community, but they found this difficult or frustrating. One particular frustration was that they felt that their neighbors questioned the extent of their injury. A popular past-time was going for a walk around the community. Despite the depression and the pain, the injured fish harvesters accepted after a long period that life had to go on. They began to develop strategies for developing a new life. At a certain stage they felt they had to begin to look to the future.

Comments

The injury had a major impact on the lives of the fish harvesters. They are hard-working people with responsibilities and feel that they do not deserve such misfortune. The stages of adjustment to the injury and subsequent disability are similar to those identified in other studies on the impact of traumatic events. In the case of the fish harvesters, fortunately various forms of income support have alleviated some of the financial concerns. However, over time the amount of financial support declined leading to a more restricted lifestyle. There also remains the more social and psychological concerns around identity and purpose in life. This was something that pervaded the accounts of the injured fish harvesters. An important challenge was the fish harvesters' relationship with their peers and with their family. The lack of their ability to work in the industry meant that they felt that they could not participate in the everyday social life with other fish harvesters. Some of them felt that their peers began to treat him with suspicion. This reaction often led to feelings of shame and anger. Together these feelings can help explain the depression experienced by many of the injured fish harvesters. The challenge was finding another way they could play an important role in their family and in their community. The partner played a very important part in dealing with this challenge.

Rehabilitation

Compensation system

Since they could no longer work, the injured fish harvesters turned to the workers' compensation system for financial and other forms of support. This was an agency with which few of them had had previous experience. Now they found that engagement with

it took up a large amount of time especially in the initial stages. They often found these encounters to be frustrating.

Lack of respect: An on-going complaint was the perceived lack of respect and suspicion shown not only by some of the caseworkers but also by neighbours. These concerns overlapped since neighbours sometimes contacted compensation system to express their suspicions and they in turn sometimes reassessed the claim or conducted surveillance of the injured worker. Since many of the fish harvesters had left school at an early age they often found it difficult to read some of the forms provided. They also found it difficult to deal with the bureaucracy. The spouses of the fishermen were also frustrated. Related to this perceived lack of respect was the lack of continuity in staff they dealt with. It seemed that either when making inquiries they were transferred from one staff member to another or they had to go through a laborious process to contact a specific individual.

Lack of understanding: A second complaint was the perceived lack of understanding of the nature of the disability. This applied to both the physical and psychological dimensions of it. It was felt that the WHSCC personnel tended to under-estimate the seriousness of the injury. A frequent complaint was the characterization of the disability as purely psychological.

Amount of compensation: A constant source of frustration was over the amount of compensation. The rules regarding rate of compensation seemed unclear and many fish harvesters reported what seemed to them to be arbitrary cuts in their rate of compensation. Some workers had turned to legal sources to obtain advice but found that this was very expensive. Others had tried to bring their spouses to meetings but found that they were not welcome.

Pressure to return to work: The orientation of staff seemed to be to get the injured worker back to work despite evidence that this might be foolhardy. Associated with reports of pressure to return to work was the claim that case workers seemed to ignore medical advice. This was coupled with an apparent ignorance of the type of work performed by the fishermen. If it was apparent that the fish harvester could not return to the industry then it was felt that they were over-pressurized to find alternative employment. A frequent complaint from many of the fishermen was the job search required by the compensation system. It was felt that this was a futile exercise in rural Newfoundland and demeaning to them.

Retraining: Several of the deep-sea fishermen had participated in some form of retraining, but all of them found it to be a waste of time for different reasons. The older workers felt that substantial retraining at their age was not worthwhile. The major challenge was that most of the fishermen had limited education. If they were injured in their middle years then the value of further education was problematic. Despite this, some fishermen felt that there must be other alternatives to lengthy periods of further education – something that would connect with their substantial experience in the fishery.

Type of work: Although they recognized that they could not return to the fishing industry, the injured fish harvesters still wanted a job with some of its qualities such as freedom and independence. Some of them had approached their former employer in the hope of getting some part-time employment ashore but were rejected. This was particularly galling since they felt they had worked for so long for that employer who did not seem to want to accept any responsibility.

Unpaid work: Many of them felt frustrated because of what were perceived as restrictions on the amount of unpaid work they could do, such as jobs around the house. Frustrated with the compensation received many fish harvesters were drawn into a lengthy appeals process. This in itself was very frustrating since it prevented them from addressing what they could begin to do with their lives. Several of the fishermen reported how their frustration with the compensation system turned to anger and an ongoing struggle with them to obtain better benefits.

Treatment

Several of the injured in-shore fish harvesters recalled in detail their encounters with the medical system. This was often frustrating since after assessment by various specialists and for some a range of surgical treatments, there was little, if any, improvement. Many of them had also received a number of sessions of physiotherapy. Some thought that this was beneficial, but access to it was limited. Some thought that it could be better organized. Others felt that the therapy was not beneficial. A common problem was the location of specialist services in St. John's. Some reported use of local services, e.g. Fit for Work. However, these were also not considered particularly useful.

Comments

These reports of the injured fish harvesters illustrate that for many of them their initial distress at the injury is compounded by their frustration with the social and health system. They defined themselves as hard-working individuals who had paid their taxes and thus were entitled to support and compensation from the state for their injury. Instead, they often encountered suspicion and lack of respect. People generally believe that they get what they deserve. Thus if they work hard they expect to be rewarded and if they are not, or even worse encounter negativity, they react with frustration and anger. The anger of the injured fish harvesters was directed at the personnel of the compensation system who seemed to have little understanding of their situation and often treated them with distrust. The failure of various forms of treatment only contributed to feelings of frustration with the system. Often the injured fish harvesters felt alone and even rejected by society. An awareness of such feelings can assist in the design and provision of more sympathetic services. In their dealings with bureaucracy people expect a fair procedure, adequate information, fairness in interpersonal relationships and a fair distribution of rewards and punishments. If this is not the case they become dissatisfied with the system. This dissatisfaction can be expressed in terms of withdrawal or anger. In the case of many of the injured fish harvesters a frequent complaint was the apparent unfairness in procedure, the lack of information and the lack of respect shown by staff. Often they complained about the seemingly arbitrary way in which made decisions. The rules and regulations seemed confusing or obscure. In addition, the extent of compensation often seemed unfair. This was especially the case for those fish harvesters who previously had been used to a high level of income. Attention to these rules of justice could assist in the development of a more accepted system.

Looking Forward

Fishery

The lure of the sea was still strongly felt by the injured fish harvesters. Many years after they had been injured out of the industry, they still longed to return to it but increasingly they recognized that their future was not at sea. Indeed, for most of them the prospect of getting any job was slim. For the few who had managed a partial return to the industry, the satisfaction was intense. For those who had reconciled to the prospect of a life ashore, the aim was to get some sort of job – or more importantly, a ‘meaningful’ job. As time went on they had gradually reconciled to the idea that they could no longer dream of returning to a life at sea:

Prevention of Accidents

Some felt that fishermen need to take more responsibility for their actions and be safety conscious. Those who had worked on the larger boats felt that it was the responsibility of the skippers. An important issue was the design of the fishing vessel. Some felt that the very size of many in-shore fishing boats was a danger in itself especially with more fishermen fishing further offshore. In addition, there was need to maintain the boats. In view of the large number of reported slips and falls several of the fishermen thought that steps should be taken to develop a less slippery surface on boats. Related to this was the increasing use of machinery in the in-shore fishery. Fish harvesters had to be aware of the dangers of new machinery: Accidents often happened when the fishermen were under pressure. There was a need to slow down. A related factor was the need to insure that fish harvesters had sufficient financial support. It was felt that the pressure to cover all their costs forced many fishermen to take unnecessary risks. Since many accidents occur on wharves, it was also important that they were well maintained. In addition, simply getting off and on boats could be dangerous. Some of the fish harvesters adopted a more fatalistic attitude and felt that there was little that they could do to prevent accidents at sea.

The deep-sea fishermen were more skeptical of the possibility of substantially reducing the rate of accidents. It was widely agreed that there had been improvements in the deep-sea industry. In particular, the men referred to the improvements in working shifts. Several fishermen referred to the progressive role of the union in enforcing safety standards. They felt that new fishermen had to be made more aware of their own role in increasing safety standards. Once again, the issue of making the ship decks less slippery was stressed. These are metal ships which are constantly washed by seawater. There was a need to take steps to reduce their slipperiness. Although it was felt that skippers today were not as vicious as in previous times unless they were restrained somehow, the risk of accidents remained. Now with the introduction of shorter hours, it was felt that it was safer on board trawlers. It was stressed that the company had an important role to play in improving safety standards.

Service Improvements

Now that they were beginning to accept that they would not return to the industry, some of the fish harvesters were able to reflect on possible improvements in service provision. The most popular was local access to specialist services. Many injured fish harvesters were very angry at the service provided by various staff involved in compensation claims and rehabilitation. They were particularly frustrated at the apparent lack of awareness by staff of the significant long-term impact of the disability. They felt that staff should be trained in handling these broader issues. Since a frequent complaint concerned the

adequacy of compensation, it was not surprising that many of the injured fish harvesters would like to see increases.

Comments

It is apparent that the injury has a long-term impact on the lives of the fish harvesters. Isolated in small fishing communities many felt that the future held few prospects for them. Years after the injury they felt frustrated at their missed opportunities and the way they had been treated. They still maintained an intense interest in the fishing industry but felt that their contribution had been ignored. In the initial stages after the injury most of the fish harvesters clung to the hope that they could return to the industry. Then as they began to grasp the character of the disability, they began to develop strategies of dealing with it. Then they began to explore the opportunities posed by the disability. Of course, this sequence of reactions is not linear but depends upon social support and opportunities. Awareness of the changing reactions offers the prospect of designing appropriate interventions to improve the quality of life of the injured fish harvesters. At the early stages the injured fish harvester will be very resistant to advice designed to consider alternative opportunities. Their experience of the various support staff only serves to heighten their frustration and anger. But over time they begin to realize the prospect of return to the fishery is unlikely and they begin to consider alternatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Background

Based upon the information collected in this study, it is evident that many injured fish harvesters continue to experience substantial distress extended periods after the initial injury. The following recommendations are designed to alleviate some of the problems they have experienced and hopefully contribute to an improved quality of life for them and future injured fish harvesters. Research on both the experience of fishing and on what it is like to be injured out of the industry remains limited.

- There is a need for an ongoing program of research designed to increase our understanding of and contribute to improvements in the quality of life of fish harvesters, both able and disabled, and their families.
- There is a comparable need to investigate the experiences and perspectives of the various providers of services for injured fish harvesters.

Life as a Fish Harvester

- Support workers should be knowledgeable about the character of the fishing industry and of the fishers' intense attachment to it.
- Support workers should be aware of the self-reliant character of fish harvesters and their sensitivity to the charge that they are malingering.

Accidents in the Fishery

- Improvements in safety in the fishery require a multi-faceted approach.
- Transport Canada, the FFAW and other agencies should consider involving injured fish harvesters in fishing vessel safety training programs.
- All skippers should be required to undergo advanced safety training.

- Service providers should recognize the major impact the injury has on the lives of the fish harvesters and their families and recognize that this can continue for an extended period. They should also recognize that it is not simply the reduced earnings but a variety of social and psychological impacts that are important.

The Disabled Life

- Service providers need to be aware of the sustained negative impact of disability on the lives of fish harvesters. Support programs should be longer term. These may be developed in collaboration with health boards and voluntary agencies.
- Opportunities for the injured fish harvesters to expand and develop alternative home/community-based activities should be explored. Their anxiety about participation in any form of physical activity should be addressed.
- Community based programs to raise general awareness of the impact of disability on individuals and families should be explored.

Rehabilitation

- Service providers should ensure that injured fish harvesters have access to information about the various benefits and are involved and advised throughout the assessment process.
- Case workers need to be advised of the need to be understanding of the broad impact of disability when dealing with fish harvesters' claims. While the case workers may not be able to provide a solution to all of the problems expressed, being prepared to listen to the fish harvesters' concerns can begin to address the sense of loss, anger, rejection and isolation experienced by them.
- Support groups for injured fish harvesters should be developed in the regions with the assistance of the FFAW and the health boards. The partners of the injured workers could also be included in these support groups.
- Obstacles to part-time employment, both in the fishing industry and in the community, need to be reduced.
- Opportunities for support services in the regions with greater access from small communities need to be investigated.

Future Prospects

- Support workers should investigate opportunities for a range of activities in which the injured fish workers could become involved that could rebuild their confidence and enable them to become more independent. These could include part-time employment and participation in voluntary organizations.
- Educational opportunities, not necessarily linked to increasing employment opportunities, should be developed. This could be part of an expanded program of adult education by local schools and colleges.
- Service workers should be aware of the temporal variability in reactions to injury/disability and orient their services accordingly.

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