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Linda Ockwell-Jenner was juggling a full-time job at a Kitchener shoe store and part time gigs as a cleaner and a vacuum saleswoman when she was hit with the diagnosis.

She had breast cancer.

The divorced mother of four had to take five weeks off for a lumpectomy and radiation treatment in Toronto. Already struggling to support her family, she went back to work at the shoe store as soon as she could.

But she faced numerous challenges, including reduced work hours, lack of health benefits, and what she called an absence of compassion.

“My experience of going back to work was really horrible,” said Ockwell-Jenner. “It was as if the people who had worked with me were scared that I was a different person.”

According to a report published this month in *European Journal of Cancer Care*, Ockwell-Jenner is one of many women to experience problems working after breast cancer treatment.

The study compiled the employment experiences of 1,181 women in Canada, the U.S., and three other countries over the last 20 years to examine how women are treated following breast cancer treatment.

The findings show that while some workplaces are supportive, report author Dr Maggi Banning concluded that many are still “guilty of a culture of ignorance” when it came to breast cancer survivors.

Among the biggest problems is employers refusing to reduce work hours to accommodate treatment, or insisting employees resign or retire.

“Many of the negative experiences centred on the unrealistic expectations and inflexibility of some employers,” Banning said in a statement.

Other problems Banning found were employers not realizing many women experience fatigue for many months after treatment and that breast cancer patients were judged on their physical appearance.

The findings are particularly troubling since a return to work signals normalcy for many people with cancer, said Banning.

It’s also financially necessary for many women, she found — something Ockwell-Jenner said was the main reason she went back to the shoe store.

“I needed a job. Without that job I couldn’t support my children, I couldn’t pay my mortgage.”

Three years after she went into remission, Ockwell-Jenner was diagnosed a second time with breast cancer. After taking more time off, she quit her job and started her own business.

Describing herself, as one of the “lucky ones,” Ockwell-Jenner now makes her living as a motivational speaker and an author.

While that worked for Ockwell-Jenner, Banning’s report stresses that working conditions for cancer survivors will only improve when employers better educate themselves about the capabilities of breast cancer survivors.



Linda Ockwell-Jenner is a breast cancer survivor who encountered problems going back to work after treatment.

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The report also suggests occupational health departments ensure all cancer survivors have a fitness to work assessment before heading back to the office.

Recommendations from the breast cancer report

- Occupational health departments should ensure all cancer survivors have a fitness to work assessment before returning
- They also need to provide managers with realistic guidelines of what to expect from an employee coming back from cancer treatment
- Welfare and employment policies need to better support and manage the return to work process, including time off to attend treatments and follow-up appointments.