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Reducing the costs of work-related musculoskeletal disorders: targeting strategies to chronic disability cases

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Abstract

Musculoskeletal disorders impose a significant direct cost burden on health care systems in the US and Canada and account for even greater indirect losses of productivity. The overall prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders is high, but a disproportionate share of costs is associated with a small number of cases with chronic pain. This is especially true for cases of occupational back pain, the single most common and costly musculoskeletal disorder in the workplace. A number of studies identify workplace characteristics associated with prolonged disability among cases of work-related back pain. These characteristics include: failure to receive job accommodations, receipt of disability benefit payments, and employment in high-risk industries or jobs that require heavy lifting. Research on the predictors of high-cost cases is limited, however, because of the lack of high-quality data and the need for a multidisciplinary approach. A new study, the *Arizona*

State University Healthy Back Study, addresses some of these issues and promises new insights into effective strategies to reduce the proportion of high-cost claims.



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Keywords

Musculoskeletal disorders; Back pain; Economics; Work disability

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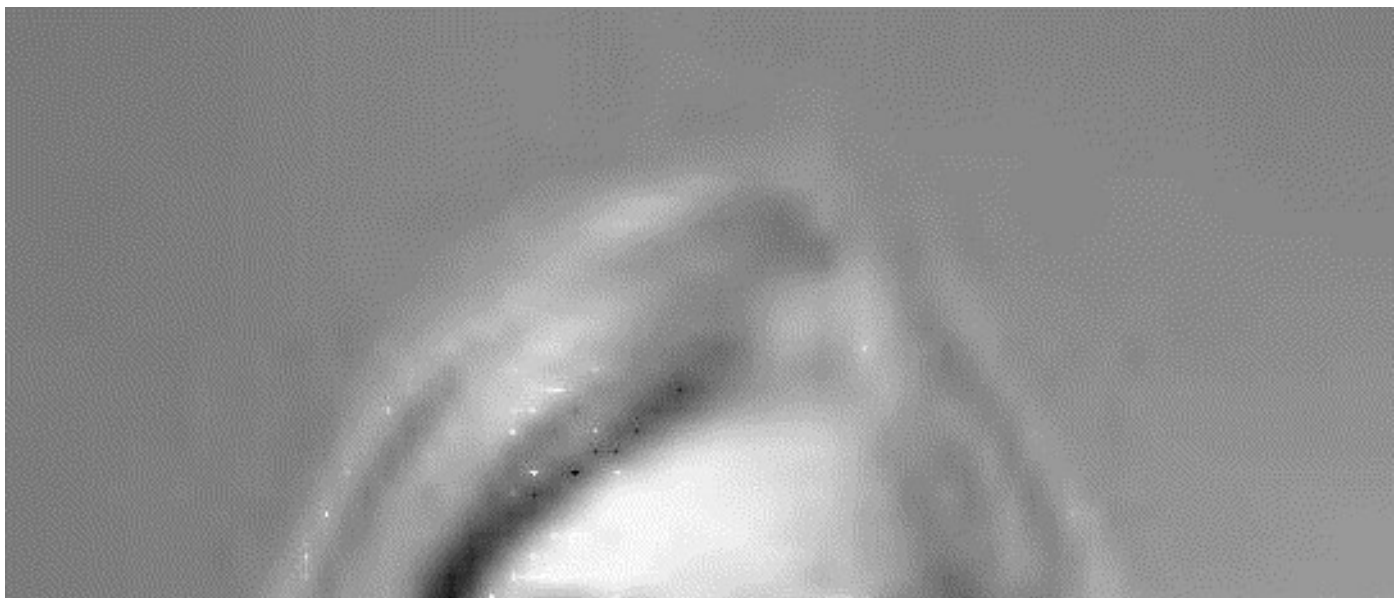
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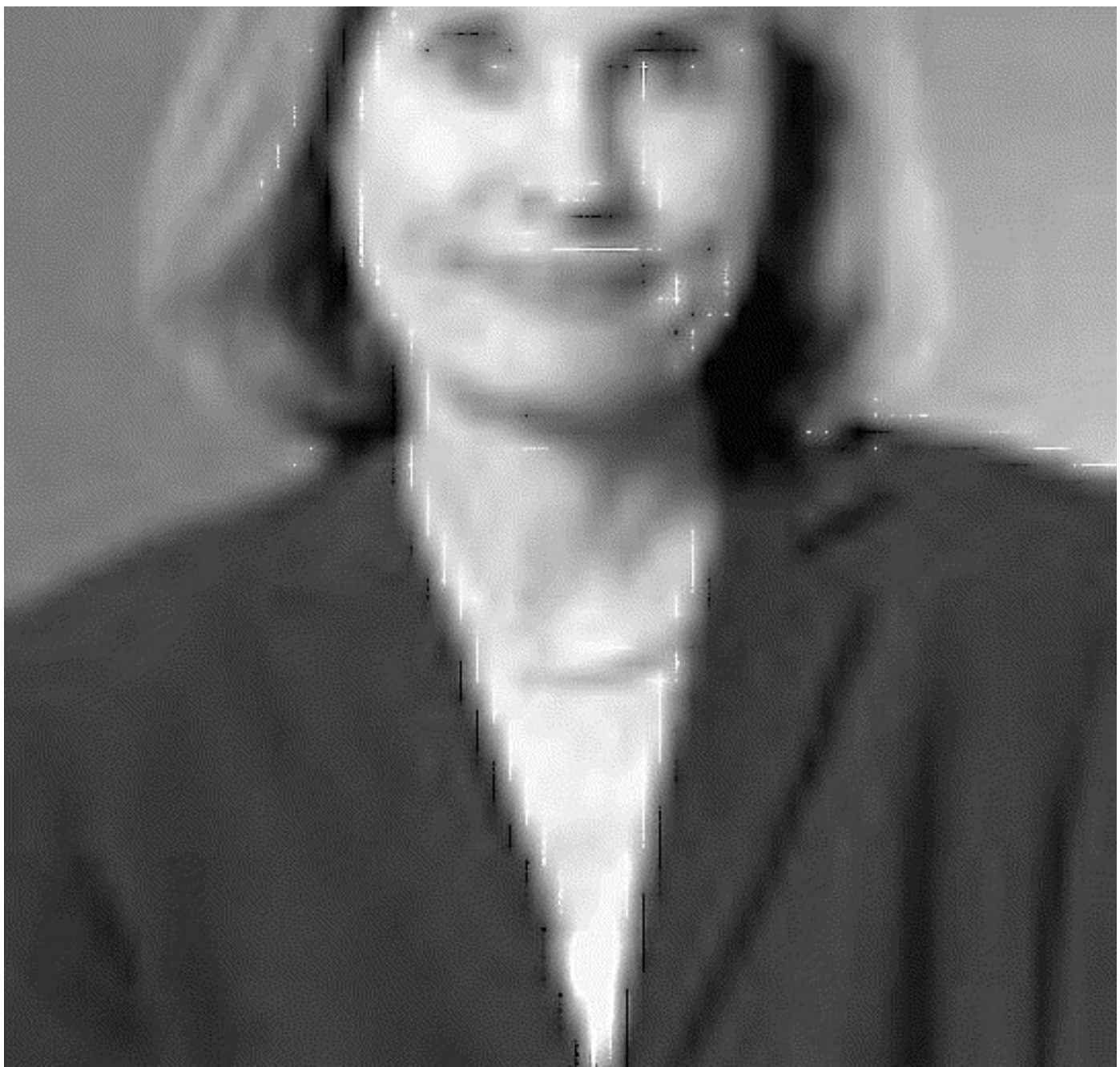
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Marjorie L. Baldwin is a Professor in the School of Health Administration and Policy in the W. P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University. Dr. Baldwin is a health economist whose research interests focus on work disability, disability-related discrimination, and the costs and outcomes of work-related injuries. She was a co-investigator for the Zenith project, a comprehensive study of the medical care costs of work-related injuries, and one of the principal investigators for a three-state study of the impact of managed care on workers' compensation medical and disability costs. She is currently one of the principal investigators for the *ASU Healthy Back Study*, the largest prospective study of work-related back injuries ever conducted in the US.

Dr. Baldwin is the recent recipient of a grant from National Institutes of Mental Health to study persons with mental disorders in the labor market. Her work has also received support from National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, Canadian Studies Research Program, and Northwestern/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research.

She has presented her research in numerous forums, including an invited presentation on “The Influence of Economic Factors on Work-Related Musculoskeletal Disabilities”, for the Panel on Musculoskeletal Disorders and the Workplace, sponsored by the National Academy of Science.

Professor Baldwin received her PhD from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University in the Department of Economics.

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