



What is degeneration? The misuse of an ambiguous word

In reporting for a large number of Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) reviews and appeals of disputed ACC decisions I have had serious concerns about the misuse of the word “degeneration.”

This imprecise word can be quite misleading. With disregard of logic there is a common assumption of a relation to age and then a further jump in “logic” to conclude that age is the major cause. ACC then respond with cessation of entitlements and treatment as in this case of a spinal injury:

...your current condition is no longer the result of your personal injury. The medical evidence concludes that your current symptoms and inability to work are attributable to the underlying degenerative changes in your lumbar spine rather than your accident related covered injury

It is often stated that single or multiple injuries or a gradual process injury from chronic overload and a number of other possible causes are aggravating but not causative factors of an underlying degenerative condition. These factors may in fact be the predominant and continuing causes. This creates major difficulties for those with osteoarthritis, disc disease, and tendinopathy when age is not the cause or has at most a minor role. Other risk factors should always be considered in assessing the multivariate causation of all musculoskeletal conditions.

The presence of so-called degenerative changes on X-ray does not exclude injuries such as disc disruption and or herniation.

The word degenerative is frequently used by radiologists and repeated by clinicians, to describe conditions which would more accurately be described as:

- Osteoarthritis for the synovial joints
- Spondylosis for the spine
- Tendinopathy for the tendons

These labels are preferable as they do not imply causation.

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