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*Eric Costen, Associate Deputy  
Minister Health Canada  
and Deputy Minister Champion  
PCU-WHS*

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## An Interview with Eric Costen, Deputy Minister Champion of PCU-WHS

Mr. Eric Costen, Associate Deputy Minister of Health Canada was appointed Deputy Minister Champion of PCU-WHS in May 2024. Following a recent visit to the PCU-WHS campus in Port Alberni and spending a full day meeting with staff of both PCU-WHS and NIDMAR, learning about the many initiatives that are taking place, he agreed to sit down for an interview. The following are responses to our questions.

***Now that you've had some time to reflect on your recent visit to the Pacific Coast University for Workplace Health Sciences (PCU-WHS) campus, and your meetings with University staff and faculty and the National Institute of Disability Management and Research (NIDMAR) staff, what are your overall thoughts and impressions?***

It was a pleasure and a privilege to be able to visit the PCU-WHS campus in the breathtaking central Vancouver Island. I'm very grateful for time the faculty and staff made to welcome and orient me to the history and priorities of this remarkable institution. What an impressive group! I'm especially grateful to Wolfgang for his very warm welcome and enthusiasm.

The team's dedication and passion were on full display through the day. It was inspiring to learn of the PCU-WHS origin story and witness the sacrifice and enduring commitment of the team. Prior to my visit I had not appreciated how unique the University's offerings are, with its specialized focus on workplace disability management and leadership. And, particularly, how this specialization sets the University apart as a global leader in the field of disability studies.

I was impressed by the focus on practical, real-world application in the various programmes. This helps to make the course offerings highly relevant for professionals who want to make a meaningful impact in disability management and workplace inclusion. In particular, the university's focus on professional certifications will help students and professionals gain recognized qualifications that can advance their careers in disability management. This is an area to be explored as we consider stronger linkages with the federal public service.

***In context of your role as Deputy Minister University Champion, and in relation to PCU-WHS/NIDMAR objectives, do you have any ideas around how you would like to move the agenda forward? Do you have any short, medium- and long-term goals?***

I think there is potential to advance different initiatives over the short, medium, and long term. Some specific actions to consider, include:

- Advocating for workplace disability inclusion through my department, the broader federal family, and my other professional networks by sharing the importance of the University's work and how its focus aligns with current diversity and inclusion goals.
- Highlighting PCU-WHS expertise and positioning PCU-WHS as a thought leader in workplace disability management, by referencing its research, certifications, and programs in relevant discussions and other engagement opportunities.
- Connecting PCU-WHS to my professional network, specifically with organizations that are interested in improving their disability management and return-to-work processes.



- Promoting PCU-WHS programs and certifications to Government of Canada professionals in disability management, human resources, occupational health, and related fields. I'm interested to see if we can enroll a member of the Health Canada leadership team.
- Helping to develop alumni networks and mentorship opportunities for current students, sharing job opportunities, and continuing advocacy efforts for the University in their professional circles.
- Recognizing and celebrating University graduates.

***In context of public policy such as accessibility legislation, long term employment being a social determinant of health and well being, affordability of housing, poverty, homelessness and addiction, where do you see opportunities for collaboration in context of the University, NIDMAR and the Federal Government?***

This is an enormous question. The possibilities are vast. I'm thinking about this in two interrelated spheres. But for the purposes of setting things out, I will deal with them separately.

First, there's the Institution itself (let's call this the internally facing sphere). I see many opportunities where PCU-WHS expertise and mission would help shape, inform, advance GOC's operating policies and practices as it strives to become a more inclusive, diverse, compassionate, accessible organization – or collection of organizations. Importantly, this could encompass helping to evolve the workforce, by cultivating the right kind of leadership, throughout the executive cadre and middle-managers, through to the most senior leadership at the deputy minister level. Over time, with awareness and competency building, one can imagine a much more sophisticated, disability management literate, and adept leadership community.

Then there are policy priorities of the government – things that are externally facing. In my mind, these are the initiatives, programs, and policies (inclusive of legislation, regulation) which seek to make Canada a more inclusive and just society, whether that is viewed through a lens of economic prosperity, growth, innovation, or social good, health and wellbeing. In this regard, the opportunities are both more concrete to conceive of and harder to realize.

For example, the University's programs in disability management and rehabilitation offer opportunities to collaborate with NIDMAR and federal agencies to address long-term employment as a critical social determinant of health. The University could lead research initiatives that evaluate how workplace accommodations and disability management contribute to long-term employment, health, and well-being. This collaboration could drive policy recommendations for better employment support programs and workplace inclusivity.

Or, for instance, PCU-WHS and NIDMAR could collaborate in the research and development of frameworks that support affordable housing initiatives, particularly for individuals who face physical or mental health challenges that affect their employment. Federal collaboration could potentially help secure funding and policy implementation to address affordable housing as a necessity for rehabilitation and social integration.

Or, for another example, the University's expertise in health and disability management can contribute to multi-sector collaboration with NIDMAR and the federal government to create policies that address the root causes of poverty, homelessness, and addiction. Research and advocacy initiatives can focus on integrating health, housing, and employment support services, recognizing the interconnected nature of these issues.

But this is all in the world of the theoretical at this point. I honestly don't know if these sorts of opportunities exist at present, though I'm happy to make some connections and see what might come of it.

