

Partners in Workplace Inclusion



Common Ground

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A bimonthly newsletter for NIDMAR and PCU-WHS's community of employers, workers, and partners

Opening Note

This issue carries both a farewell and a milestone. Mike Carleton steps off the NIDMAR board after more than three decades: long enough to remember when consensus-based disability management was still just an idea. His reflection on what's changed is worth your time.

Meanwhile, the CDMP-E has crossed its first international border, our partnership with Malaysia has been renewed and expanded, and the mental health claims data in our Sector Spotlight is a reminder that the field still has hard work ahead of it.

We're grateful for the community that shows up for that work.

— Wolfgang Zimmermann, Executive Director, NIDMAR



FEATURE

The Long View

Mike Carleton has spent more than three decades helping build the field of disability management in Canada. As he steps off the board, he reflects on where the work began and how far it's come.

In 1967, Mike Carleton started his first year at Simon Fraser University. The campus had just opened. It sat on top of a mountain in Burnaby, and like most buildings in Canada at the time, it hadn't been designed with accessibility in mind.

"One of my classes was at the bottom of the tiered classrooms," he says. "I had to go up and down the steep access road outside because I couldn't use the stairs. That was just a reflection of a university campus that wasn't fully accessible. But somehow I coped."

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Two years later, in 1969, Mike was involved in an automobile accident that left him a paraplegic. He returned to SFU, finished his degree, completed a professional teaching certificate, and went looking for work. But what he found was that most schools weren't architecturally accessible either, and that teacher surplus made competition fierce. So when he spotted a posting at the BC Workers' Compensation Board for a claims adjudicator, he figured he'd take it for six months and reassess.

He stayed for more than a decade.

"One thing led to another," he says, with the practiced understatement of someone who has told a very long story before and knows where to trim it. What drew him deeper wasn't the claims work, it was vocational rehabilitation. "I saw that as a more meaningful kind of role in terms of my interests." He took counselling psychology courses at UBC, applied internally, and moved into vocational rehab.

The work was rewarding, but the limits were hard to ignore. "In those days, there was no right to rehabilitation. There was no act that required employers to accommodate injured workers." He was going out to employers, offering financial incentives to hire people coming back from injuries. Cost-sharing arrangements. Six-month trials. "You were depending on the scope of the employment, whether the employer could accommodate someone who had an injury. And it could be a range of injuries."

He was seeing, up close, what happened when the system didn't have an answer.

A new approach

In 1989, Mike moved to the BC government, becoming Executive Director of the Premier's Advisory Council for Persons with Disabilities. His mandate was broader now: not just injured workers, but people with disabilities across the board. He wanted to find pathways to greater employer familiarity with accommodation: not as a legal obligation, but as something organizations understood how to do well.

That's where he met Wolfgang Zimmermann.

Wolfgang joined the council as a member and was eventually appointed as its chair. The two of them began working closely together, and Wolfgang was developing an idea that Mike recognized immediately. "He was putting forward this new concept of consensus-based disability management, where employers and unions would come together to treat the accommodation of their injured workers as a joint challenge that they could solve by working together."

It made sense on every level. Employers had economic reasons to bring people back. Unions had reasons to fight for their members' continued employment and income. "They had a common purpose," Mike says, "and that allowed them to work together without the level of strain that existed in other parts of the relationship."

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When NIDMAR was formed out of these ideas, the model was baked in from the start: co-chairs from industry and labour, sitting at the same table. The first two were Peter Lawrie, a senior executive at MacMillan Bloedel, and Brian Payne, national director of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union. Men who might otherwise face each other across a bargaining table were now working toward the same thing.

"We used to joke," Mike says, "that Wolfgang wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than world domination."

He laughs. And then he points out, with evident satisfaction, that the last time he checked, there were 25 countries with agreements in place for consensus-based disability management certification.

What changed

Over three decades on the NIDMAR board (and eventually the PCU-WHS Board of Governors as well, when the university was established in the early 2000s) Mike watched the field transform.

The most significant shift, he says, has been the move from accommodation as an afterthought to accommodation as something organizations plan for. "It's now part of the management role — to work with unions to achieve that outcome for their injured workers." British Columbia and Ontario both now have statutory requirements for employers to support return to work. The financial incentives and cost-sharing arrangements Mike used to offer employers in the 1980s were a workaround for a system that hadn't caught up. The system eventually caught up.

He also spent time as an appeal commissioner in the workers' compensation system, seeing from yet another vantage point what happened when accommodation failed. "A lot of the appeals were focused around that. They were the outcome of a failure to accommodate workers following an injury." The same patterns, again and again, at the end of the road.

And through all of it, the built environment was changing too. Since 1979, buildings in British Columbia have been required under the building code to be fully accessible. "That means wherever the public is invited, the building has to be accessible," he says. "And that means more employment opportunities for people who have disabilities."

He started university on a campus where he had to navigate the access road to get to class. Now the law requires the door to be open.

"I've seen a lot of changes," he says. "Things that, initially, you had to fight for. You had to push and advocate to get them in place. And now they're reasonable expectations."

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Stepping back

After more than 30 years on the board, Mike is stepping away. He's been retired for some years now, living in Ontario's wine country with his wife.

He'll continue evaluating scholarship and bursary applications for PCU-WHS. And he's candid that Wolfgang will occasionally surface with something that needs doing. "Every once in a while, Wolfgang will throw something out at me," he says. "So I'll have that as a continuing role."

But mostly, he says, he's enjoying theatre, and a slower pace.

When asked what's stayed with him from his time on the board, he doesn't reach for achievements or milestones. He talks about people. "I've met some very committed and talented people, and that has been very rewarding." He mentions Joyce Gravelle specifically — NIDMAR's longtime Assistant Executive Director — as someone whose influence on making all of this happen is impossible to overstate. "She's been a wonderful, dynamic builder."

And he talks about the through-line: the single purpose that connected everyone he worked with, regardless of which side of the table they came from. "It's been a pleasure to work with people who have had a single-minded theme — to have better outcomes for workers who end up with disabilities or illnesses, who have difficulty returning to the workforce."

Thirty-some years ago, Mike Carleton took what he thought was a temporary job while he figured out something else. He figured out something else entirely.

Mike Carleton served on the NIDMAR Board of Directors and the PCU-WHS Board of Governors for more than three decades. He is based in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.



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NEWS & UPDATES

A First for the CDMP-E: Gustav Pruß Completes the First International Exam

When the CDMP-E launched in May 2026, all eight inaugural recipients were Canadian. That changed this summer.

Gustav Pruß, a disability management professional based in Germany, has become the first person outside of Canada to complete the CDMP-E examination. This is a milestone that signals the designation is ready to travel.

Gustav's path to the CDMP-E spans three decades. He spent roughly 30 years as a Rehabilitation Manager for the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the trade and logistics sector (Berufsgenossenschaft Handel und Warenlogistik), coordinating medical, vocational, and social rehabilitation for workers following occupational accidents or work-related illness. In 2006, he co-founded VDiMa e.V. — the German Association of Certified Disability Managers — which has since grown into a network of CDMP professionals across Germany, organizing approximately 350 continuing education events and advocating at the policy level for the profession.

Preparing for the exam in a second language was a genuine challenge. "As a German, preparing for the examination in English was certainly a challenge for me," he says. "The CDMP-E Exam Preparation Manual was extremely helpful — it gave me a clear understanding of the scope and level of professional knowledge and leadership competence expected." He also credits Wolfgang Zimmermann directly: "He patiently addressed my questions, gave me valuable guidance, and most importantly, encouraged me to take on the challenge."

For Gustav, the designation has already changed how his contributions land in professional settings. "Even after a relatively short time, I have noticed that my professional views and contributions carry greater weight," he says. "It also makes it easier for me to lead, encourage, and motivate other CDMPs."

His employer, the Berufsgenossenschaft, was equally pleased. "My professional journey in this field would not have been possible without the continuous encouragement and support of my Berufsgenossenschaft," he says. "I am very grateful for the trust and opportunities I have been given over the years."



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Gustav's exam marks the beginning of what Lorne Sulsky described at the May launch ceremony as the natural next chapter for the designation: international reach, and eventually, an international community of CDMP-E holders.

Gustav Pruß is a senior rehabilitation expert with the Statutory Accident Insurance Institution for Trade (BGHW) in Germany, and is the first international recipient of the CDMP-E certification.

PERKESO Renews Agreement with NIDMAR: Expanding to Japan, China, and Tanzania

Malaysia's Social Security Organization (PERKESO) has renewed its partnership agreement with NIDMAR for another five years, and significantly expanded its scope.

The renewed agreement extends PERKESO's long-standing role as the regional hub for CDMP and CRTWC certification in Southeast Asia, and adds something new: rights to award the CDMP designation in Japan, China, and Tanzania.

PERKESO and NIDMAR's partnership dates back to 2010, when Malaysia became the first Asian country to adopt the internationally recognized CDMP certification. In the years since, the program has grown substantially. More than 334 individuals earned the CDMP or CRTWC through PERKESO in its first 13 years, and in 2024 alone, 183 individuals graduated. Malaysia has also served as a gateway for the wider region, with PERKESO's reach already extending to all of the ASEAN countries.

The expansion into Japan, China, and Tanzania represents a meaningful step. Japan and China together represent two of the world's largest workforces; Tanzania signals the designation's first formal foothold in East Africa. For a field built on the idea that consensus-based disability management can work anywhere employers and workers share an interest in keeping people in meaningful employment, these are significant additions.

The renewed agreement reinforces Malaysia's position not just as a regional partner, but as one of NIDMAR's most important international relationships and proof that the model travels.

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RPI's Disability and Employment Chatbot Keeps Growing

The Reducing Poverty through Early Intervention and Occupational Rehabilitation Initiative

(RPI) now has a chatbot dedicated to Disability and Employment support, and it's grown fast. The tool currently holds 337 records organized under six headlines, giving workers, employers, and practitioners a faster way to find the information they need.

A New AI Guide to CDMP Prep

Gustav Pruß's exam success (see above) is a good reminder that NIDMAR has a tool for anyone considering the CDMP or CDMP-E: the CDMP Gold Standard chatbot, an AI-powered guide covering both designations. It can answer common questions, point you to the right resources, and help you find what you need without digging through the full site. There's a short video walkthrough, *Your Path to CDMP Certification: An AI Guide to Getting Started*, available [here](#).

SECTOR SPOTLIGHT

The mental health claims surge: What it means for DM

For most of the history of disability management, the field was built around physical injuries. That's no longer the landscape.

Mental health conditions are now the leading driver of long-term disability claims in Canada, accounting for nearly 40% of LTD claims, and have become the most common diagnostic category. Mental health-related disabilities also saw the largest increase of any disability type between 2017 and 2022, rising six percentage points according to Statistics Canada. A May 2026 survey found that 34% of employed Canadians whose mental health affects their functioning said their work was highly disrupted, up from 30% the previous year. The total cost to the Canadian economy: an estimated \$180 billion annually, with employers absorbing roughly 61% of that figure.

The challenge for DM practitioners is that mental health claims are harder to manage than physical ones. Recovery isn't linear, timelines are less predictable, and stigma affects whether workers disclose early enough for intervention to help. By the time a claim is filed, the situation is often more complex than it needed to be.

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The fundamentals of good disability management (early intervention, coordinated support, a focus on the whole person, etc.) are exactly what this moment calls for. But applying them to mental health claims requires purpose-built tools: manager training, structured return-to-work protocols designed for non-linear recovery, and cultures where workers feel safe enough to surface concerns before they become leaves. The field is evolving to meet that need. The evidence says it's worth the investment: mental health programs running three or more years have shown a median return of \$2.18 for every dollar spent.

Sources: Mental Health Research Canada (2026); Statistics Canada Canadian Survey on Disability 2022; CSA Public Policy Centre; Workplace Strategies for Mental Health.

Coming Up

DM Solutions Platform — Coming Soon. NIDMAR is in the final stages of rolling out the DM Solutions Platform: an AI-powered tool built on real-world case studies contributed by CDMPs. The platform grew out of the WDA grant and is designed to give practitioners fast access to the kind of accumulated practice knowledge that normally lives only in people's heads. To contribute a case study, you'll need to hold your CDMP — which means the knowledge base stays grounded in the people who've actually done this work. More details coming soon.

New Certificate Program: Contemporary Intelligence and Economics in Disability Management. PCU-WHS is launching a new certificate program this September that brings together economic analysis, AI-enabled practice, program evaluation, and Indigenous relations. The four courses are DMCS 600 Understanding Reconciliation and Indigenous Relations, DMCS 735 Economics of Disability Management: Measuring Value and Impact Across Multiple Levels, DMCS 740 Leveraging AI in DM: Practical Applications for Enhanced Efficiency, and DMCCT Evaluating DM Programs and Assessing RTW Processes. All four are endorsed by CSPDM for CEC hours toward the CDMP and CRTWC designations. Details can be found at www.pcu-whs.ca/2026/07/new-certificate-program-commencing-september-2026/.

New Course: DMCS 735 Economics of Disability Management. The first offering of DMCS 735 runs October 5 to 25, 2026. It looks at how DM programs create value at the personal, organizational, and societal level, and gives practitioners the tools to build an evidence-based case for their programs and apply the right metrics in their own workplace. This will be the first course on this specific topic offered anywhere in Canada. More information can be found at www.pcu-whs.ca/2026/06/12944/.

New Course: DMCS 820 Optimizing Your DM Program & Ensuring Legislative Compliance. Coming in early 2027, this four-week online introductory course is designed for HR professionals, supervisors, health and safety staff, and managers with little or no prior experience in disability management and return-to-work. Participants build foundational knowledge, then complete the Disability Management Self-Assessment (DMSA) and develop

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a practical workplace improvement plan. The course takes a reflective, self-development approach: participants assess their current strengths, skills, and knowledge to identify gaps, while also considering their organization's readiness and capacity to create or optimize a DM program, build the right organizational culture, and demonstrate results through ROI measurement.

NIDMAR and PCU-WHS respectfully acknowledge that their offices are located on the traditional and unceded territories of the Hupačasath and Tseshahat First Nations of western Vancouver Island.

Questions or story ideas?

Contact us at nidmar@nidmar.ca or at info@pcu-whs.ca
