

Helping injured patients return to work safely

Recent changes in workers' compensation legislation have seen return to work programs become more structured and form a vital link in injury management systems in the workplace.

With over 12,000 lost time claims recorded in WA in 2004/05*, many general practitioners are becoming increasingly involved in developing formal return to work programs for injured patients.

Dr Barry Fatovich has been practicing for almost 30 years and sees his work in this area of patient care as very rewarding.

"Work provides many people with their social environment and sense of worth, so when they incur an injury, time away from the workplace can have both physical and psychological effects," Dr Fatovich said.

"If injured workers are kept away from the workplace unnecessarily they often experience social isolation, lowered self esteem and reduced confidence.

"Return to work programs help patients return at the appropriate time and keep them in touch with the workplace and contributing to productivity," Dr Fatovich said.

So what makes a good return to work program and what factors should practitioners consider?

According to Dr Fatovich, a good return to work program should be developed with the skills of an approved rehabilitation provider. It should be individually developed to match the injured worker's capabilities, limitations and needs, and include meaningful and productive work duties.

"The program should be clear, simple and appropriately graduated to balance the work environment to the rate of improvement of the patient.

"It needs to consider the patient's motivation and understanding, their rate of healing, the conditions of the workplace and the requirements of the insurer.

"For some patients, factors such as literacy and the psychological effects of obtaining an injury may influence their understanding of the compensation process and their motivation to return to work.

"Doctors may need to rely on their previous knowledge of the patient to help develop the program or to counsel the patient to help manage their expectations or anxiety.

Return to work programs provide clarity for both employers and employees and help create realistic expectations during the period

of recovery. However, in some instances the attitudes of work colleagues and management can often be a hurdle for injured workers and subsequently affect the patient's mindset and desire to remain within the workplace.

Dr Fatovich suggests that good communication and education within the workplace can help to overcome these challenges and create an environment that is more sympathetic and conducive to return to work patients.

"It is important to ensure all parties understand the extent of the injury and the schedule within the return to work program to remove uncertainty and correctly identify tasks appropriate to their rate of recovery," Dr Fatovich said.

"Sometimes employees and employers may have a different perspective on the physical limitations, work restrictions and schedule of return.

"The details of the return to work program need to be clearly understood and time frames established to meet the long term goal of returning the worker to their permanent position.

"Ongoing monitoring and open communication between all parties are both vital to the success of any return to work program."

Practitioners seeking information about workers' compensation and injury management matters, and the important role of approved vocational rehabilitation providers, are encouraged to contact WorkCover WA. More information about workers' compensation, injury management and return to work programs in Western Australia is available from WorkCover WA. Simply call the Infoline on 1300 794 744 or visit the website at www.workcover.wa.gov.au.

* Source: *Workers' Compensation in Western Australia Statistical Report 2001/02 – 2004/05 (May 2006)*.



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