

Injury Management: Making a Difference One Life at a Time

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Introduction

Injuries occur in the workplace as evidenced by the ever growing number of injuries reported to the OSHA Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). In 2011, the BLS reports that there were 4,609 fatal occupational injuries. These lives were in our hands to make a safe work environment. We need to seriously look at making a difference in our work environment one injury at a time, potentially saving one life at a time.

For 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics non-fatal figures involving days away from work, where a work site can often easily impact the course of an injury and the recovery of the employee, the statistics are great. Industry wide in 2011, there were 340,870 reported sprains, strains and tears; 76,680 bruises and contusion; 32,450 non-specified injuries resulting in soreness, pain to the back and 109,160 soreness, pain, to unspecified parts. The employer can be pro-active in making a difference in how these injuries impact the employee and employer.

It is not that injuries are inevitable. In fact, injuries are preventable; however, in the absence of prevention, workplace injuries will occur. How an employer, manager, supervisor, shift lead responds to that injury when the injury first occurs makes all the difference in the world as to the length of recovery for the injured employee, lost wages, the employee's self-worth/self-esteem and as a byproduct of all of these things, it affects the workers' compensation claim costs. It is all about taking each injury as if it were one life at a time.

Appropriate Care at the Appropriate Time

Key to What Happens to the Claim

How we respond to the initial injury, is usually the one pivoting action that directs the rest of the claim. Many times the person "in charge" at the work location whether it be the supervisor, team lead, manager, etc. are the ones that will make the first determination of how they will react to an injury. The successful treatment of the injury is often like stacked dominoes.

First, the person in charge will need to determine if this is a life-threatening emergency. Notice the choice of words, "Life Threatening". That is the key to the first step that needs to be taken. If it is life threatening, no time should be wasted and the emergency medical system (EMS) should be activated immediately. All reports, notifications of higher levels of management, etc.

should wait until AFTER EMS is activated. Once EMS is activated and the employee is being tended to by the appropriate medical professionals, all the other company notifications can be made.

Should the injury or illness not be “Life Threatening,” other actions can take place that may drastically affect the outcome of the injury. The first thing is that the person in charge should remain calm and realize that this is NOT “Life Threatening”.

Many Cases are Over Treated

In today’s society, we want it here and we want it now. We are not patient for anything. Not for our hamburger, not for our checkout at the grocery store, not for the commute that is hindered by an auto accident and we certainly are not patient when it comes to our medical care. We want the instant “get me better, quick” pill. We want a pill to lose weight, a pill to fall asleep, a pill to wake up, a pill to not be hungry, a pill to give us a boost of energy, the list goes on. We have been so programmed in this manner that we think we need to see a physician for every scrape and bump (especially true if it is work-related) and if we see a physician we expect that he or she will give us a prescription. As recently reported in the news, we have now been experiencing the potential of creating a “superbug” resistant to many antibiotics called the Nightmare Bacteria because we have been over treating simple viruses with unnecessary antibiotic therapy, causing them to be resistant to the medications and creating new strains of the virus that does not respond to the antibiotics. WOW! The right treatment at the right time CANNOT be emphasized strong enough.

Once Lost Time Starts, Difficult to Break Cycle

Have you ever been on a vacation or a long weekend holiday? Wasn’t it nice not to have to get up and be somewhere all day long? You know how hard it is to go back to work after having that time off. That EARNED time off? Now, imagine that you have just injured yourself at work and the treating physician gives you time away from work. You know your boss is going to be mad at you. You also know that your peers are going to have to “pick up the slack” for you not being there. You have nothing but time (and pain pills) on hand to think about how everyone must really be mad at you. You get a sick feeling in your gut when you think about going back to work. Walking in that first day and seeing everyone. Knowing the comments they may make (or at least the ones you think they will make). Slowly but surely that back pain now is worse AND it includes your left hip. Now you are anxious, now depressed, now 3 months have passed and you are not even sure who works at the worksite anymore.

Once an employee is off work, the cycle is hard to break. The longer they are off the harder it is to get them back to work. If an employee is off for more than 6 months it is not likely that you will be bringing them back to work. The psyche of an injured employee is very hard to overcome. The psychosocial factors that affect the employee’s ability to return to work are plagued with depression, frustration, thoughts of discrimination and perceived delays in workers’ compensation care.

The best way to break the cycle is to not let it start, of course. In the absence of a perfect world, here are some strategies to help halt the potential of lost work days:

- Upon hire/orientation, let the employees know that a quick return to work for occupational injuries is the organizations goal

- Educate your potential treating clinic, before an injury, and inform them of the company's willingness to make reasonable accommodations
- Train your supervisors, line managers, or whoever within management will be responsible for interacting with an injured employee on what the first steps are in responding to an injury
- If the employee is given any restrictions, accommodate those restrictions
- If the employee is off work, designate someone from the site, preferably someone that is compassionate, to call the employee at their home at least weekly.
- Ensure that you have communicated to the treating physician that return to work is an option

Compassionate Care

People Want to Know that Someone Cares

Your grandmother used to tell you "Treat others the way you would want to be treated". Your grandmother was right. You should always treat others with dignity and respect. Sometimes this is challenging in the workplace when you feel someone may not be telling the truth about an injury. Put all that aside and take the employee at the face value with regard to their pain, their injury. Use your internal investigation to determine otherwise and as far as workers' compensation compensability, put that on the shoulders of the insurance company, not yours.

Lack of Compassion May Lead to Quicker Legal Representation

When an employee feels that they are not taken seriously about their injury, either related to the pain they feel or the injury itself, they will quickly turn to the legal community for assistance.

Turn on your television set during the middle of the day, what do you see? Commercial after commercial about how the employee is being mistreated by their company is what the off work, injured employee is being shown hour after hour during their recover. They also see how much money the attorneys claim to get for their clients. When an employee retains an attorney, their claim goes into slow motion. Everything has to be communicated from their attorney to the insurance carrier's attorney. Have you ever had to get an attorney on the phone?? Don't let your lack of compassion be the deciding factor for an employee seeking legal representation. It is a lose-lose situation for everyone involved (except the attorney).

Importance of Handling Your Emotions

You have an employee, you think they are claiming a work-related injury for something that actually happened this past weekend when he was out rock climbing. You want to call him on it but you know better than to take that approach. How can you show this person compassion? How can you act like you want to accommodate any restrictions the doctor wants to give? This employee is ruining the safety record that everyone else has worked so hard to gain. How do you keep your emotions in check?

It is imperative that you keep your suspicions to yourself when talking to the employee about their injury. You must show compassion because regardless of how the incident really occurred, this is an injured person. You let the investigation prove any discrepancies and you communicate to the insurance adjuster anytime you question a claim.

When a supervisor or manager or shift lead does not handle their emotions and verbalizes to the employee or others their frustrations with an injury or doubts about how the injury occurred at work, this adds to the employee frustrations and really accelerates their path to an attorney.

Injury Management: The Journey

Preparing BEFORE an injury occurs

It is important to prepare before an injury occurs. This means choosing the right clinic. The right clinic, hopefully, will be one that is an occupational clinic. What would be even better is if it were a Board Certified Occupational Health physician as well. This is important as they understand the importance of a quick return to work in the recovery process as well as the use of conservative care. You should also ensure that every employee knows what the injury management process is and what the expectations are for the employee to follow, starting with immediate reporting of the injury.

Initial Response: First Aid vs. 911

In initiating an injury management program, you will likely be asked, “How do I know the difference of when to call 911 and when to use first aid. This can be answered very simply. What would they do if this injury occurred at their home with their loved one i.e.: son, daughter, mother, father, husband, wife, etc. Would you call 911? If it were a less severe injury where you are not contemplating 911, but are trying to decide if they need to see the physician such as with a sprained ankle, what would you do? Would you take your loved one immediately to the physician or would you wait and see if the ankle was still sore in morning? Remember, the right treatment at the right time.

On-Going Follow-up

An injury continues until the person reaches their pre-injury state or until they reach their maximum medical improvement. So, for the employee where you wait to see how the ankle is in the morning, you will want to go by and check up on that employee in the morning or have him report to the office in the morning before going to his work station. You continue to do this until the employee no longer has any pain, discomfort or concern. Of course, the employee will need to be using conservative treatment to help facilitate the recovery i.e.: OTC anti-inflammatories, ice, etc. On-going follow-up also means that if they do have a clinic visit and the physician has put them on restrictions, they will need to continue to follow-up with the physician until they have no restrictions. If they have a follow-up appointment but are working full duty, they still must attend that MD visit. There is some reason that the physician wants to see them again. Until the physician is satisfied that the employee is at a full duty release and there is no further medical follow-up, they are considered to still be under medical treatment. As their employer, you will need to continue to ensure that the employee attends all of their follow-ups, even if they are feeling better.

Contact during Lost Time

Maintaining at least weekly contact with the employee while they are off work for an occupational injury is very important to keeping that employee engaged with the workplace and the workforce. This assigned person from the worksite calling the injured employee needs to be someone that is compassionate. It does not have to be a lengthy telephone conversation. You do not want to have them “dig” for information. You just want them to simply inquire, genuinely, as to how the employee is feeling. The worksite representative should also note that they look forward to this employee returning to the worksite. They can then end the conversation by asking if there is anything regarding their workers’ compensation claim that they need assistance with. If there is, be sure to follow-up with the insurance carrier, workers’ compensation manager or whoever would be the contact person to follow-up on the inquiry. Then relay the information back to the employee in a timely manner. Remember, they have nothing but time and commercials of attorneys on their hands.

Medical Treatment Approval: Employee Advocate

Sometimes the injured employee is waiting for approval on surgery or physical therapy, etc. If this is relayed to the site, the company representative handling the workers' compensation claims will need to be notified. Communication will need to be relayed back to the employee as to what actions are being taken to help them receive the care that they need. The site will need to be the advocate for the employee in ensuring the injured employee receives the medical care they need in a timely manner. The right treatment at the right time is an important goal to have related to workplace injuries.

Closing a Claim (Case)

Right Treatment at the Right Time

From the initial reporting of the injury to the closure of the workers' compensation claim or case, the right treatment at the right time is the motto. If the employee suffers a strain/sprain, the right treatment at the right time might be conservative over-the-counter first aid treatment. The site representatives need to be knowledgeable about first aid and over-the-counter medications or have a medical resource available to discuss this option with the employee. If the employee needs more significant medical care i.e.: MRI's, surgery, physical therapy, etc. then the site needs to ensure that these items are approved as quickly as possible so the employee can begin their treatment and recovery process.

Immediate Investigation

The site should perform an investigation as soon as possible. First, use the OSHA recordability determination tree to begin the process of determining if this is an OSHA recordable incident. The investigation should include a handwritten, signed statement from the employee. You will also need to gather other pertinent data such as whether or not the employee was scheduled to do the work that the employee states he/she was doing at the time of injury. Were all the proper personal protective equipment being used i.e.: cut resistant gloves, steel toed boots, etc. Was the employee following the correct procedures while performing the task? You should also gather witness statements from co-workers, supervisors, etc. A reenactment of the event(s) can be very revealing to those involved, including the injured employee. Be careful not to have another injury during the reenactment. Then, the person responsible for the investigation should collate all this data into a summary of the investigation with a determination of corrective actions to be implemented.

Escort to Clinic

In an effort to ensure the employee gets the appropriate treatment at the appropriate time, it is often common practice to escort an employee to the clinic for their initial evaluation. This is also an opportunity to provide the clinic with the billing information for the workers' compensation carrier so that the employee does not receive any medical billing. Finally, escorting an employee to the clinic will also allow you to verify any restrictions the employee may receive or if it is off work notice, to remind the physician that you will make accommodations at the worksite for any light duty he/she feels is appropriate for the injury.

Follow-up with Employee after Every Visit

The employee should know that one of his/her responsibilities is to communicate with the work site after every MD visit the work status the MD has provided. This is usually communicated on a form from the doctor's office that states when the employee can return to work and what

restrictions the employee has as well as the next MD follow-up visit. Even if the employee is off work, he/she is responsible to ensure that the site receives the documentation after EVERY MD visit indicating their work status.

Employees MUST have Responsibilities

This injury is the employee's injury. They must take responsibility for the medical care they receive. This means that they must communicate with the site after every MD visit. They must attend every MD visit, even if they feel better. They need to notify their supervisor if their restrictions are not being adhered to.

Advocating for the employee with the insurance carrier

Workers' Compensation carriers are known for their delay in approving treatment for employees.

It does not have to be that way. You need to be the advocate for the employee to the insurance carrier. This means that while the employee communicates to you what is going on with their care i.e.: return to work, etc. They also need to let you know if a referral to a specialist is being requested or physical therapy, etc. You should follow-up immediately with the insurance carrier to let them know to expect the referral. This also lets the carrier know that you are aware and on top of the case. You will need to make a notation to follow-up with the insurance carrier every 2-3 days until the treatment is authorized or a denial is made.

Keep Employee informed

This is a lot of information for the employee to deal with along with the injury itself. As you gather information from the insurance carrier regarding approvals or your request to the adjuster for approval you should communicate this back to the employee. Once the employee knows that you are their advocate and you are "on their side", they will readily communicate with you after every MD appointment. Getting the employee the right care at the right time is a win-win situation for everyone.

Conclusion

Injuries are avoidable with a strong plan for prevention. This takes time to develop, obstacles to overcome and changes in longstanding work place cultures. As you strive towards your goal of preventing all injuries, take to heart the implementation of a comprehensive injury management program. Providing the employee with the appropriate care at the appropriate time, compassionate care, aggressive injury management and ensuring closure of the case can make all the difference, one life at a time.

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