

Working Toward A Speedy Recovery

Workers' compensation insurers are helping workers do their jobs more cautiously and are micromanaging injury treatment and the return to work.

by Lynna Goch

When a health-care worker at a skilled-nursing facility in Denver injured her shoulder and neck assisting a patient, a nurse case manager from RTW Inc., a workers' compensation and disability manager, received the report that day.

The nurse interviewed the employee about her injury, prior health problems and any emotional or psychological concerns that could delay recovery. The nurse determined that the injured employee was likely to stay off the job longer than normal.

What happened next illustrates the way workers' comp insurers and service providers are micromanaging cases to get people back to work more quickly. They're also stepping up efforts to help prevent injuries on the job.

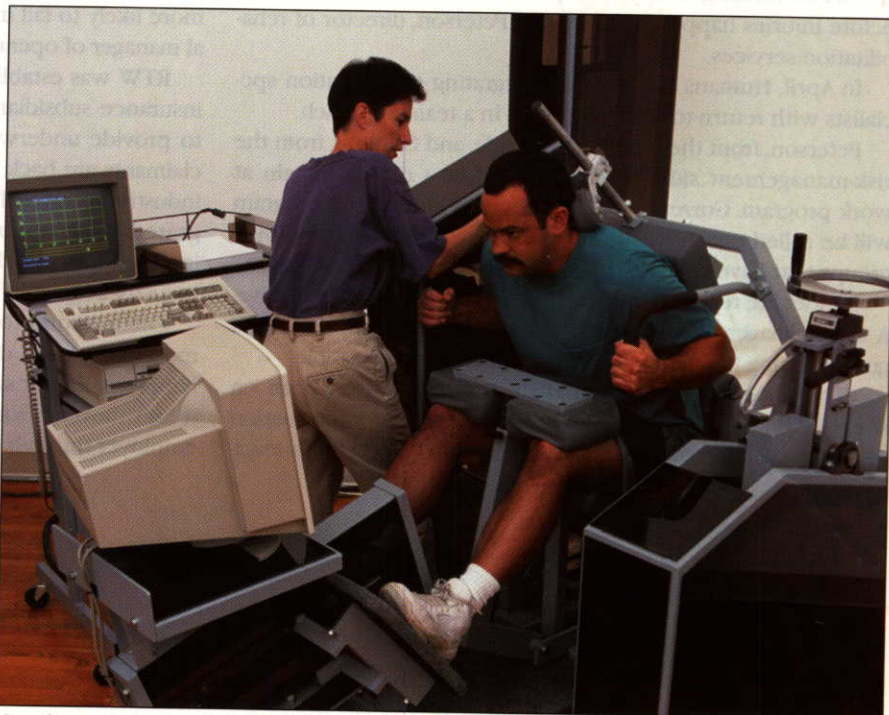
RTW went to the skilled-nursing facility and helped select an alternative job for the worker. The case manager arranged transportation to medical appointments and attended the appointments with the injured worker. When the employee was back at work, the case manager visited her on the job to ensure she had alternative duties, rather than risking another injury by returning to her old job too quickly.

The injured employee returned to work within four weeks and to full duty within eight weeks. The claim cost \$2,563 compared with the \$11,971 typically spent to treat that type of injury, based on the National Council on Compensation Insurance's Workers' Compensation Claim Characteristic Series.

Stiff competition and low premiums are prompting insurers and self-insured employers to find new ways to cut workers' comp expenses. In 1998, U.S. workers' comp insurers wrote \$28.87 billion in direct premiums, up just 1.6% from 1997, and the adjusted loss ratio for the line rose 7.3 points to 72.2.

The focus has turned to preventing injuries and managing medical costs more closely because the maximum gains achievable from managed care have been realized, according to the council.

Some insurers are integrating rehabilitation with return-to-work programs, while others are closely monitoring the claimants who are most likely to have extended absences.



On the job: There is greater emphasis on making sure injured workers make it to their appointments for medical examinations and physical therapy.

An Ounce of Prevention

More major employers are looking at the behavioral aspect of worker safety. "Five to 10 years ago the focus was on eliminating or isolating hazards, now the aspect of how an employee's behavior factors in the injury is being examined," said Bob Brody, vice president of loss prevention and engineering, Travelers Property Casualty Corp., Hartford, Conn.

Blame it on human nature. Employees become comfortable being around hazards and become less cautious. "The company has to get comfortable in the role of interacting with employees to reinforce the work process and the safe behaviors involved," Brody said. Travelers encourages its clients to make safety another value like production and quality and to reinforce positive behavior.

Humana Workers' Compensation Services, which manages workers' comp programs for insurers and employers, takes a hands-on approach to injury prevention by training employees how to avoid injury, studying work sites and monitoring injuries. The challenge is convincing

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

employers to place greater importance on workers' comp issues.

"Workers' comp is a minor concern with employers, but becomes a big concern after an accident," said Bill Gilmour, who heads Humana WCS' risk-management services.

Humana WCS is a subsidiary of Humana Inc., a large, managed-care company based in Louisville, Ky. The WCS subsidiary, which is based primarily in Longwood, Fla., has 18,000 business customers representing 450,000 employees in 17 southeastern and Midwestern states.

The business relationship begins with a complete loss analysis of the workplace. Specialists inspect job sites and offer advice on how to change work areas to be ergonomically correct with an eye toward preventing injuries.

"We're looking at a pre-emptive strike: Let's get in there before injuries happen," said Cindee Peterson, director of rehabilitation services.

In April, Humana WCS began integrating rehabilitation specialists with return-to-work strategies in a team approach.

Peterson, from the rehabilitation side, and Gilmour, from the risk-management side, have put together a return/remain at work program. Currently available only in Florida, the program will be rolled out shortly in Ohio. The goal is to help employer groups that have risk and injury problems lower their costs.

Injuries are reported immediately to a Humana representative. A case manager nurse oversees the employee's recovery with a goal of getting the person back to work as soon as possible.

"The important thing is that the nurse who has been on site, working with the employer, is the point of coordination until the case is completed," Peterson said. "The communica-

tion and coordination of all the involved parties is the program's center point."

Humana conducts a post-accident analysis of the injury to try to prevent it from happening again. "We go on site and inspect the work area and integrate our post-injury rehabilitation services with a program of job-site analysis for loss prevention, so employers don't just get lip service," Gilmour said.

When RTW founder Dave Prosser operated a home health-care business in the 1980s in Minnesota, he found that while home care was less expensive than hospitalization, at-home recovery was tied closely to personal issues. Patients with high-risk factors at home, such as alcoholism or relationship problems, were more likely to linger in the workers' comp system.

"He found that patients with personal problems tend to be more likely to fall into chronic pain," said Pat Sheveland, general manager of operations in RTW's Englewood, Colo., office.

RTW was established in 1983, and in 1992 formed its own insurance subsidiary, American Compensation Insurance Co., to provide underwriting, case and claims management. RTW claimants are back to work in an average of 4.3 weeks vs. the industry average of 27 weeks, according to a 1998 Cigna Integrated Care/Gallup study. RTW also reported an average incurred loss per claim of \$2,255 last year, compared with the industry average of \$6,189.

Often, return-to-work programs aren't successful because most companies don't have the support staff to make them happen, Gilmour said. "They need help to guide them through it and move it from a concept to a reality. We hand-hold the employer through the return-to-work process," he said. ■



HUMANA®

Workers' Compensation Services

we make it work for you.