

Where the good doctors are

Bridging a gap in workplace Injury Management Programs

By Anne Cherry

Many Australian employers and injured employees have experienced the benefits of early injury reporting and workplace-based return-to-work efforts. What they haven't experienced is consistent, high-standard medical input from treating doctors.

Interestingly, employers may be contributing to this gap in their injury management programs when they say to an injured employee "go see your treating doctor". Some treating doctors have little understanding or desire to deal with workers compensation cases. The best of injury management programs can be stalled by lack of medical input. And it's sometimes difficult for employers and injured employees to know where the good doctors are!

Some employers have 'doctor lists'. Unfortunately, these doctors are mainly used for second opinions rather than treatment. This 'dueling doctor' set-up only benefits the legal profession! Even if the doctors on the list are used for treatment, quality control and outcome measurement are often lacking. Monitoring such activities requires dedicated time and resources. Hence the emergence of practitioner network organisations in recent years.

What is a practitioner network organisation?

A practitioner network organisation links employers and injured employees with well-informed local practitioners who are familiar with work-place conditions and injury management principles.

If you only need the name of a doctor try the Yellow Pages™; the most comprehensive list available! If you need doctors who are willing to communicate and who understand the commercial impact of their medical decisions; find a network organisation which is dedicated to promoting communication between employers, injured employees and practitioners.

What types of practitioners are in a network?

Doctors (mainly GPs) and Physiotherapists who operate in a primary care setting are best suited for prompt access. A network promoting occupational health physicians and other specialists may be useful, but you are unlikely to obtain a prompt, local appointment with these professionals immediately following a work-related injury. Some network organisations can provide links to these types of professionals, if required, later in the treatment process.

“you need doctors who are willing to communicate and who understand the commercial impact of their medical decisions”



Why use a practitioner network?

A network organisation can generally coordinate access to practitioners more promptly than individual employers or employees. By virtue of a systematic approach and a volume of referrals, a network organisation develops good working relationships with practitioners and their administrators. The expectations, needs and capacities of all parties are well understood and accommodated.

A systematic approach leads to a consistent, high standard of medical input. Practitioners become familiar with the system and can focus on quality treatment and communication rather than paperwork. Initial training and regular review means protocols become familiar to all parties. When an injury occurs, employees, managers, practitioners and administration staff all know the drill. This reduces misunderstandings and communication breakdowns which typically plague employer-practitioner relations.

Managers report feeling more competent with injury management because they have a practical resource to offer injured employees. Employees report feeling more secure and cared for in an effective and efficient manner.

“Prompt access to a practitioner increases control over injury management for injured employees and managers.”

These psychological benefits generate a positive workplace culture, the strongest driver of proactive injury management behaviour. Such a culture enhances the more commonly stated benefits of early intervention: reduced lost time, reduced claim costs and reduced premium.

The Psychology of Choice

In every Australian workers compensation jurisdiction, injured employees have the right to choose their own treating practitioners. Most injured employees just want to get medical help fast! Rather than creating a dueling situation between the doctor the employee chooses and the doctor the organisation chooses, savvy organisations offer injured employees access to a practitioner network for treatment, the moment the employee reports an injury.

When an organisation can offer prompt, easy access to treatment by a practitioner who is attuned to work-related injuries, a majority of injured employees accept. Regardless of whether the injured employee chooses to be treated by a network practitioner or their own family GP, the employee is involved in the decision. This kind of involvement usually generates commitment to the return-to-work process, a critical success factor.

In some cases, an injured employee will choose to be treated by a family GP out of mistrust or other situational factors within the workplace. This is not to say that injured employees who choose to be treated by a family GP have issues within the workplace, but if any such barriers exist they quickly become apparent when choice is available.

It is important to note that practitioner networks should not be considered ‘company doctors’. The practitioners are independent medical professionals, offered as a resource to employees by the organisation.

What to look for in a practitioner network organisation

There are five key features to look for in a practitioner network. Firstly, effective practitioner networks spend significant time training and educating practitioners, administration staff and employers on network systems, standards and protocols. Secondly, prompt timely appointments for medical treatment is a given. Thirdly, geographical access is important, especially for employers with geographically wide-spread sites or a travelling workforce. Fourthly, quality assurance and improvement are critical features. Finally, effective network organisations can produce data and

trend reports for employers regarding network usage. Information gleaned from such reports can be combined with employers’ workers compensation claims data to produce a clear picture of lost time savings and cultural impact.

Which types of employers benefit most?

Employers who are looking for a systematic approach which provides consistent high quality medical input benefit most from a Practitioner Network. Such employers are willing to pay for practitioner communication, availability and service. They are willing to put internal structure and awareness programs in place and maintain them. They are willing to work with practitioners and, finally, they are strongly focused on outcome measurement.

Bridging a gap

The emerging field of Practitioner Networks for treatment of work-related injuries assists organisations to bridge a gap in their injury management programs. By offering injured employees prompt access to practitioners who are communicative and understand the commercial impact of their medical decisions, savvy organisations are generating positive involvement from all parties and optimising their injury management program performance.

Author Affiliation

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