

What to Look For in an Occupational Health Provider

Here's a list of what to look for in an industrial medical care or occupational health provider that treats ill or injured employees covered by workers' compensation.

By **Susan L Gilpin**

See www.workforce.com

Choosing an industrial medical care provider involves far more than just listening to a marketing pitch or finding the clinic that's closest to the company plant. While location and convenience are factors, the most important criteria are clear communication and a mutual philosophy of returning employees to work as soon as medically feasible.

"In the real world, companies may make their choices because of a marketing campaign. There may be a hospital in the area that has an industrial-medicine department. Or a clinic out there is marketing its programs," notes Dr. Rodney Isom, a commissioner with the Certification of Disability Management Specialists Commission (CDMSC) and an assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitation, Social Work and Addictions at the University of North Texas in Denton.

"Sometimes companies are picking providers because of a direct-marketing campaign, or because of word of mouth from an insurance agent or an attorney," Isom says.

No "disabling mentality"

While that may be a way of finding out about potential candidates, it's certainly not the best - or the only -- selection criterion.

"In a few words, the best selection criterion is someone who understands return-to-work," says Chris Wood, president of Massachusetts-based Injury Management Resources Inc., a regional provider of disability management services.

"What that means is you want someone who sees patients very promptly," Wood says. "It's someone who will consider circumstances under which a person can return to work; they don't have a disabling mentality. The occupational health care providers understand that people have restrictions, but they are willing to consider what the person needs to get back to work. Maybe they have to sit instead of stand, or work only two hours at first. It's an orientation around what the circumstances are that allow a person to return to work, as opposed to all the reasons why they can't."

Indeed, a return-to-work philosophy is so important that it tops the "checklist" for employers that are looking to select an industrial medical care or occupational health provider that treats ill or injured employees covered by workers' compensation.

1. Return-to-Work Philosophy

Under return-to-work (RTW) programs, ill or injured workers are eased back into the workplace with either modified job duties or a temporary assignment elsewhere in the

company. RTW falls under the category of disability management, which aims to reduce absenteeism and improve productivity.

"Employers are more concerned with productivity these days," says Rea Crane, medical rehabilitation director for the California Workers' Compensation Institute and chair of the CDMSC. "Instead of just finding replacements, they are more concerned about getting the experienced employee back onto the payroll."

Further, disability-management and RTW programs demonstrate a willingness to bring ill or injured employees back to work, which in the long run may also protect an employer from costly litigation brought under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The majority of ADA lawsuits stem from workers' compensation cases.

It's essential that the industrial medical care provider understand the company's RTW program, including its job-accommodation policies and the willingness to place workers in temporary, alternate assignments. In turn, the company must assess whether the care provider embraces the concept of RTW as being good for both the employee and employer.

"The main thing is to have a dialogue with the physician and the care providers so that they're part of the company's RTW team," says Janna Calkins, a Certified Disability Management Specialist in California and the former chair of the CDMSC.

The company, for its part, must also provide job descriptions to the physician or other caregiver that describe in detail the physical requirements of the employee's tasks.

2. Communication

Hand in hand with the return-to-work philosophy is the need for clear and direct communication between the employer, the physician, and the insurance company. "Not only does the physician need to be able to write reports that fit within the workers' compensation or long-term disability framework, but the physicians need to be accessible," Calkins notes.

If a worker experiences a recurrence of symptoms or problems, that employee should be seen by the treating physician right away, or the on-site medical staff at the company plant must be able to contact the treating physician as soon as possible. Further, the physician must clearly communicate details about the treatment to the employee and the employer.

"Communication with the treating physician is so important, and sometimes you want that communication before the report comes out," Calkins adds. "That can be done through a slip of paper or a phone call after the employee sees the doctor for the first time."

3. On-Site Visits

To better understand the physical demands of the job and the general environment, industrial medical care providers should -- when possible and if feasible under state workers' compensation statutes -- visit the worksite, whether it's an office or a factory. "If a doctor has no idea what the job requires, how can that doctor make assumptions

about whether or not a person could perform those duties?" says Barbara Graham, who is coordinator of employment support services at the Pittsburgh Vision Services and spent 17 years in private rehabilitation practice.

Graham describes the services of Pittsburgh Vision Services, which helps to place employees who have visual impairments and/or other disabilities. Working on site, Pittsburgh Vision Services provides training and vocational support for employees, from entry-level workers to people with PhDs. While workers' compensation cases do not usually entail that kind of one-on-one, on-site treatment, the industrial medical care provider must be in a position to evaluate and suggest job accommodations.

"We keep in constant contact with the employers to find out how we can make our consumers more successful in their positions. It's analogous to any type of RTW program, to make sure that the consumer/client -- in this case, the injured worker -- is successful in the program," Graham adds.

When visiting the work site, industrial medical care providers themselves should make careful observations beyond just the employee workstations. Other considerations are the physical layout of the facility, the entrances, doorways, and halls, and even the way employees appear to relate to each other. "Is there good employee interaction that can be observed?" Graham notes. "If so, then there is a better chance that the person who is being accommodated on the job will have the support of his or her peers."

4. Facilities and Certification

In assessing an industrial medical care provider, the quality and condition of the facilities are certainly considerations, along with its location (for ease of employee access) and even the hours of operation. "An employer doesn't really want workers just going to a 'mill' where treatment is churned out -- one size fits all," Calkins observes. "A few dollars spent to go to a really good doctor will save dollars down the road."

The same selection criteria can be extended to rehabilitation professionals, especially when it comes to expertise and certifications held.

In addition to certifications, Calkins says, "you can't beat experience. If you have a rehab counselor who has put 50 people back to work and another rehab counselor who has 2,000 successful cases, there is no comparison."

Further, companies should find out what kinds of worker injuries and conditions the care-provider deals with most frequently. Even if the industries are dissimilar -- perhaps a wood-products factory, a chicken-processing plant, and a telemarketing company -- the commonality could be treating injuries related to repetitive stress.

While industrial medical and rehabilitative care providers may focus on the "cure," many are also looking at prevention, whether it's ergonomic changes to the workplace or an observation about the workforce. Perhaps the majority of workers are baby boomers who will soon face more age-related illnesses and conditions, such as arthritis and diabetes. Then health-awareness programs might help workers to prevent illness and injuries by making changes in their diets and exercise.

5. Initial History and Records

When it comes to workers' compensation cases, it's important who takes down the employee's initial history. Calkins suggests that a physician or other medical/rehabilitation professional record the history, instead of clerical staff who may lack the ability and experience to "tease out" the details related to the employee and the case.

"Case-recording is very important to avoid 'story migration,' in which the details change in the telling and retelling," she says.

Having the physician take the initial history will help to record not only the details of the condition but also any previous conditions that might have an impact on treatment or the employee's health. And, as Calkins suggests, there may be an added benefit: "It helps to build the relationship between the physician and the employee."

In the end, the selection of an industrial medical care provider comes down to partnership. Treating employees who are ill or injured and getting them back to work as soon as medically feasible requires not only communication but also cooperation among all parties: the employer, the employee, and the physician.

Susan Gilpin is the CEO of the [Certification of Disability Management Specialist Commission](#). The [Certification of Disability Management Specialists Commission](#) is the only national body that certifies and establishes a professional code of ethics for disability management specialists.