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## Speak Out

### INCIDENT INTERVENTION: A POWERFUL RESOURCE IN LOSS CONTROL

BY PETER GREANEY

For most health and safety managers, work responsibilities encompass more than complying with OSHA standards and overseeing tailgate meetings. Aside from ensuring a safe and healthful workplace, managers must keep a close eye on the costs of their programs.

To help meet this challenge, incident management services are available from qualified occupational health doctors, nurses and outsourcing firms. These services are designed to support company safety goals and targets while reducing runaway costs associated with workplace injuries and illnesses.

Incident management, also known as incident intervention, is a two-stage process in which preloss or postloss services are initiated at time-critical periods. Preloss incident intervention is used immediately upon the discovery of an employee injury/illness to minimize the escalation of the incident, reducing the risk that it could become a workers' compensation claim, lost work day(s) or an OSHA recordable.

#### HOW INCIDENT INTERVENTION WORKS

A worker injured his back while lifting an object at a job site. The supervisor responded by sending the employee to an occupational health clinic. The clinic's doctor determined that the worker suffered a mild back strain and prescribed Motrin for one week. The doctor sent the employee back to work, but the treatment he prescribed caused the incident to be an OSHA recordable injury. OSHA requires the incident to be recorded if prescription medications are used, except for a single dose administered on the first visit for minor injury.

A doctor with expertise in incident management could have "intervened" and consulted with the treating physician to recommend the use of Advil versus Motrin. This treatment approach would have been equally effective for the employee, while preventing an OSHA recordable.

The physician who provides this service should have the expertise and training to serve as a medical advocate for the employee, recommending the right treatment plan that ensures appropriate patient care while returning the employee to work as early as possible. The goal of incident intervention is to provide the right care, not less care.

The postloss phase of incident intervention (after incident) is aimed at returning a recovered employee to work as quickly as possible. Employers should consider adopting disability-management systems that use a proactive approach to return employees to work. Research indicates that most companies experience a 25–30 percent reduction in disability costs in the first year after implementing such a system.

These programs include "transitional employment," a process in which the employer and employee agree on a scheduled plan with incremental steps (duration, production speed, lift capacities and other job functions) designed to encourage the full productivity of a returning employee.

Transitional employment is not light duty. It is a process in which the employee has expressed the desire to return to full-capacity work or the treating physician recommends a return to work. The employer and employee agree to a work plan that allows the employee to work at a level that is safe and tolerable. An occupational physician can assist in setting up this plan.

Typically, a physician will rely exclusively on the employee's perspective to determine if the worker should return to work. Without input from the employer,

doctors often prescribe time off for work-related injuries.

Through incident intervention, corporate medical directors who work on behalf of clients can consult with the treating physician to establish alternative patient treatments. The corporate medical director will ask the treating physician what type of work the employee can perform and recommend a modified work plan instead of time off. These doctor-to-doctor calls have proven to be effective in reducing workers' compensation claims, preventing lost workdays and getting the employee back into a productive role.

Occupational doctors report that it takes less than a few days for a person to buy into the "I can't work" syndrome. Getting employees back to work as quickly as possible helps avoid the disability mindset.

#### MEASURABLE RESULTS

Mike Luker, industrial hygiene manager for USFilter, Warrendale, Pa., said his company has avoided 8–10 losttime accidents a year by using incident intervention. "In most cases, employees are back to work on restricted or full duty. This is a service our workers' compensation carrier cannot perform," he said.

Insurance companies only provide case management services after an incident becomes a claim and they have been informed, which is typically 6–10 days after the incident. In contrast, incident intervention focuses on managing the incident to prevent needless claims.

The practice of incident intervention relies on using consultative services by qualified health professionals at time-critical stages. Although this practice is not as widely recognized or as easily understood as the conventional back safety program, it's a proven resource in supporting corporate health and safety goals.

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