

## Health Care Help

### Providers Stress Injury Prevention, Wellness

By Frank M. Messana, DO

**T**he relationship between occupational medicine providers and employers has been changing significantly over the last several years. Employers are asking health care providers to not only care for injured employees, but also to promote injury prevention and workplace wellness.

Workplace illness and injury not only produce personal suffering, but also can impact a company's overall profitability. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that about 4% of gross domestic product worldwide is lost because of work-related diseases and injuries. The good news is that in 2008, the ILO reported that in both developed and emerging economies, investments in targeted accident prevention policies reduced the number of workplace accidents by 25% to 50%. The push for preventative medicine has made its way into the mainstream as more and more employers recognize the financial costs resulting from injury and disease – and the benefits of prevention.

Injury prevention can – and in this author's opinion should – begin before an employee is hired. How? Many providers are utilizing various forms of advanced ergonomic evaluations to assess the workplace and employees. A job demands analysis (JDA) is used to quantify the physical demands placed on the employee and provides a better understanding of the interaction between a worker and his or her specific working environment or equipment.

#### Evaluating the position

JDA's can be performed in a wide range of environments – from a new office setting to an established manufacturing plant. Information collected allows employers to:

- create (or update) accurate job descriptions;
- recognize problems in an existing job or workplace;
- identify issues and potential problems before a new design or system is implemented;
- trace the origin of the injury;
- provide medical professionals with guidelines for an injured employee's return to work;
- pinpoint areas where ergonomic changes may be required;
- establish a screening system for job applicants to ensure safety and improve productivity; and
- develop job-specific, post-offer employment assessments to ensure individuals have the ability to safely perform the job for which they are being hired.

In my clinic, we noticed a particular company that had a significant number of carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive use injuries. Performing a JDA isolated several jobs as contributing factors. Consequently, the employer was able to establish a job rotation throughout the day that greatly reduces workers' exposure. Our staff also provided a pre-shift exercise program that prepares employees' bodies to better handle their specific job demands. Since then, the reported cases of carpal tunnel syndrome and

repetitive use injuries have been greatly reduced.

Another example involves a company that had a number of injuries occurring in the first 30 to 45 days of employment. Specific job descriptions were created based on an onsite JDA we conducted. The organization now requires post-offer employment assessments for all employees. Subsequently, the injuries reported in those first 30 to 45 days – as well as overall injuries – have decreased significantly.



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#### Changing demographics

Implementing a workplace wellness program is another step employers can take to increase profit margins and productivity. As our workforce ages, this becomes even more critical. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2014 the number of people in the workforce age 55 and older is projected to grow by 42%, with those over age 65 projected to rise by 74%. Older workers are more susceptible to secondary injuries due to loss of strength and flexibility, decreased visual and hearing acuity, and slower nervous system responses. In addition, senior workers are prone to chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, lung disease and obesity – and treatments for each leads to increased health care and prescription costs.

An increasing number of employers are offering workers incentives for adopting healthy behaviors in an effort to control health care costs. A survey conducted by Watson Wyatt, a leading global consulting firm, and the National Business Group on Health found that these employers achieve 20% more revenue per employee, have 16.1% higher market value and deliver 57% higher shareholder returns (from 2004 to 2006). In addition, they experience health care cost increases at a greatly lower rate than other employers, boasting:

- five times lower sick leave;
- four and a half times lower long-term disability;
- four times lower short-term disability; and
- three and a half times lower general health coverage.

Occupational health providers are well positioned to help employers implement injury prevention programs, manage an aging workforce and high health care costs, and help improve productivity. At our clinic, we manage wellness programs for small and large companies as well as municipalities. All have seen tremendous benefits to the morale, overall health and awareness of their employees.

#### INFORMATION LINK

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