

Physio network speeds recovery



WARMUP: Tracey Loehr simulates her work program by moving weights to higher from lower shelves under the eye of physiotherapist Peter Milner, a member of the Active Physiotherapy group.

ON THE JOB



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Increasingly, organizations are turning to something other than – or at least in addition to – the Workers' Compensation Board to help injured employees get back to work.

It makes sense for some employers to bypass the bureaucracy completely and pay out

of pocket for quick, effective treatment when a worker is hurt on the job.

After all, lost time is the biggest cost factor for employers when an injured worker is down and out. So the sooner the employee gets back to work the better.

One group of health practitioners which knows that only too well is physiotherapists.

So a fair number of them who own independent clinics across the country have gotten together to form a network. The members are proving to help ease some of the pain and frustration of dealing with WCB claims.

Called Active Physiotherapy Rehabilitation Group, the network was formed in 1992 by the owner of a successful private clinic in downtown Toronto. It now has 153 members across Canada, 34 in Alberta.

The group was formed to respond to increasing competition, especially from non-physiotherapist owned clinics. But with rising costs in WCB claims, employers are finding there are other benefits to the new network.

"Employers are really frustrated with the current situation and are looking for an alternative," says Maura Milner, whose husband operates 17th Avenue Physiotherapy and is a member of Active.

"There certainly is a role for the WCB. It's not a competition. I like to look at (Active) as helping to relieve the (WCB) stress load."

Dennis Milkert at Westroc Industries Ltd. is one employer who has seen its worth.

Last year he had two workers who were injured on the job. Despite receiving treatment through the WCB, both employees still weren't able to function fully on their return to work.

So Milkert sent them to an Active clinic in Calgary for additional physiotherapy.

"They came back happier. They altered their work programs and before long they were back up to snuff," says Milkert.

As a result, Milkert says the next time a worker is hurt on the job, he expects he will send the employee to an Active clinic first, for faster treatment and to keep his WCB costs down.

"The thing to emphasize is to minimize the amount of work lost," says Gaye Sydenham of Edmonton, who with husband Bob has co-ordinated the Active members in Alberta.

Statistics show the longer that treatment is drawn out the longer it takes to get an employee back to work and the more costly it becomes, she points out.

Sydenham says what employers seem to like about Active is the clinics' fast turnaround time. Workers can be seen within 24 hours once a clinic is contacted.

Fees are front-end loaded, meaning as the injured worker improves, the costs go down. And aside from the initial assessment, progress reports and modified work programs are forwarded on a regular basis to the employer.

As the name goes, the treatment is also "active," not passive, meaning workers are encouraged to get involved in an exercise program – and that can be an intensive 3 1/2 hours of physiotherapy each day.

And because of national co-ordination and standardization, clients can transfer from one facility to another and be assured of continuity of their rehabilitation program.

Tracey Loehr, who received whiplash in a car accident last February says she believes that because of the intensity of the Active program she will be back to work as early as May.

The 25-year-old tried to return to her two part-time retail jobs shortly after her car was rear-ended, but found her back was getting worse instead of better.

Now, with a 3 1/2-hour workout each day, Loehr says she's probably 75 per cent recovered.

Milner says because of cuts to Alberta Health Care, physiotherapy clinics are seeing an increasing number of clients using private or group insurance plans.

So that means employers have a bigger stake in workers' treatment than ever before.

"There is a big void. Employers want better control over what happens to their employees," she says.