

Rapid Recovery

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Developing personalized injury management systems with occupational health care providers can mean quicker recovery-times from injuries and fewer days off the job.

Fabricators, erectors and contractors make a continuous effort to work safely. They care about the people around them, they understand the hazards of heavy construction, and they know that organization and expertise can keep their team safe. Nonetheless, occasional injuries do occur. Developing a comprehensive injury management program, one that guarantees prompt and thorough health care, can help keep our co-workers on-the-job and as healthy as possible.

ON-SITE ATTENTION

One factor that paves the way for effective injury management is clear communication between supervisors and workers on the job site. Effectively identifying accidents and the severity of resulting injuries is best accomplished when reports and comments are unambiguous—supervisors must ensure that open channels of communication exist to identify work-related injuries and encourage immediate treatment by qualified occupational healthcare providers. Supervisors and workers must clarify for each other whether comments about accidents and pain are true reports of injury or just complaints, and respond accordingly.

Immediate attention and care for injuries can often prevent more severe problems later, improving outcomes and reducing the risk of re-injury. "If an employee falls down and pulls a muscle, he might say he's okay," said David Sailing, Manager of Operations for AISC-member Zalk Josephs Fabricators of Stoughton, WI. "But then suddenly he might have pain in the middle of the night, and go to his own doctor.

Days later, the provider, unfamiliar with the work site or occupational medicine, might not properly examine the patient, and could say to take three days off—and you then have a lost-time accident right away."

Sailing recommends that supervisors or managers accompany injured workers to hospitals or clinics, and advocate for thorough and swift treatment. "We've found that if you just send them up there with a driver, you can't give specific instructions to the physician, and sometimes you'll find out that the care they received was inadequate," he said.

AISC-member Douglas Steel Fabricating Corporation of Lansing, MI has also worked to improve on-site communication. "All of our supervisors are first-aid and CPR certified, and they have procedures for the pre-evaluation of an injury," said Douglas Engineering & Safety Manager Larry Kruth. "Our employees know that they won't be penalized for reporting an injury, and our supervisors understand how serious those injuries can be."

ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS

Another key to preventing lost-time injuries is establishing an ongoing relationship with a clinic that specializes in occupational safety. By doing so, doctors, supervisors and workers are able to familiarize themselves with potential occupational hazards, and can work together to keep employees injury-free and on-the-job.

Zalk Josephs has teamed up with Concentra Medical Centers, a national occupational healthcare provider, to create an injury management program tailored to the specific needs of the fabrication shop. Concentra begins by as-

sessing a company's needs: a medical center director visits the company's job sites to meet with risk managers, evaluate the work space and to gain an understanding of the types of work-related injuries that can occur.

"Concentra came in and looked at every position that we had here, and we worked together in writing descriptions [for those positions] that described what the jobs entail," Sailing said. "Lifting, twisting, turning walking, or climbing...for each operation they came to work with us on that. That way, the doctor could see what the workers do."

Concentra creates customized protocols for the various construction positions that describe job operations and their potential hazards. When a worker is injured, doctors can check the protocol for the position of the injured person, which helps determine how to proceed with appropriate injury treatment. Doctors also use the protocol to identify light-duty tasks for injured patients to perform upon return to the workplace, to help facilitate an active recovery—so patients don't spend days out-of-commission.

"It helps the doctor decide when a person should go back to light duty," Sailing said. "And now that the worker has a relationship with the doctor, the worker can get the doctor's input on how to prevent further injuries."

The system also helps Concentra keep track of injuries to prevent them in the future. "For every client, we track the types of injuries treated and develop detailed reports so that we can let companies know where their injuries are happening," said Sharon Covington-Kearns, Health Services Manager for Concentra's Madison, WI

Injury Avoidance

Managing injuries is important—but the best way to avoid lost-time accidents is not to have them. Zalk Josephs Fabricators' Manager of Operations David Sailing outlines some of his company's procedures that make worker safety a top priority.

Safety has to start at the top. All accidents are avoidable, and the owner or president of a company must provide direction and support for safety programs in order for them to succeed. Education starts with front line supervisors.

- 1** All supervisors are issued and trained in a *Plant Safety Manual*, which covers safety and health issues pertaining to OSHA requirements for our industry. It includes custom safety programs developed to aid in the continuing education of injury prevention as well as follow-up care procedures should an accident occur.
- 2** Supervisors are sent to 10- and 30-hour OSHA standards training course.
- 3** Worker safety starts during the hiring and screening process. It is important to ask prospective employees questions about their attitudes towards different safety programs. After employees pass a pre-placement health performance evaluation and drug screen, preventative education begins.
- 4** On the first day of employment, I [the manager of operations] sit down with the new employee and take him or her through the entire safety program. We watch safety videos and review the safety manual. We cover disciplinary action the company will issue for not following safe work practices. I take new employees on a walk through the plant, and show them the items that we discussed in the classroom. On their first full day of employment, they are assigned to our shop-safety trainer who is responsible for training and overseeing new employees until they are competent enough to work on their own. This usually takes about one to three months.
- 5** Shop supervisors conduct safety shop talks with their own crews every two weeks with issues pertaining to safe-work practices.
- 6** Supervisors conduct monthly plant-safety inspections to look for unsafe conditions in the work areas.
- 7** We have monthly safety meetings with a union committee to review potential unsafe work practices that could be occurring.
- 8** Management holds a quarterly safety meeting to review new ideas to improve our safety programs. Management also creates reward programs for excellence in safety.
- 9** Once a year I invite the State of Wisconsin for a voluntary safety consultation and walk-through, to check for any unsafe conditions or practices.
- 10** Finally, employee appraisals weigh heavy on individual safety performance and appraisals could impact employees in the pocket book. This sends a message of accountability, which is an important part of the program. ★

The associated article is the result of discussion and activities of the AISC Safety Committee. The Committee mission is to:

- Serve as a major advocate of loss prevention and control within the steel fabricating industry.
- Assist AISC members in achieving the economic and moral benefits that can result from effective management controls in lost workday injury prevention, and the prevention of other incidents which adversely affect operations.

The committee welcomes your thoughts on this article as well as your participation and support of future activities. Contact Tom Schlafly, secretary of the Safety Committee, via email at schlafly@aisc.org.

clinic. "If a company is having more eye injuries or back injuries, it's a red flag, and the company needs to consider process improvements to reduce those types of injuries."

Douglas Steel has teamed up with an occupational health clinic in a local hospital to create a similar partnership.

"Every employee that comes to work is given what we call a functional capacity test," Kruth said. "The local occupational health clinic actually went into our shop and watched all of the activities taking place. They built mock-ups so they could duplicate activities [for the workers' functional capacity test]."

The test measures skills such as stepping over bunks, climbing a ladder to a certain height, lifting and carrying heavy weights for a distance over a set course, and monitoring the angle of a workers' backs as they perform tasks that simulate the action of bending over to weld, clean or shovel. Kruth says that since the test has been implemented, there have been few injuries and no lost-time injuries.

"The people who administer the test monitor blood pressure, pulse rate, and proper lifting techniques," Kruth said. "If a worker's pulse rate gets too high, or they cannot complete the test, it shows us that the work exceeds a person's limits. If a potential employee cannot meet the essential requirements of the test, the individual is not hired for that position. The test duplicates operations in our shop, and all employees may be called upon to perform any task as required to complete the fabrication of steel."

QUICK TREATMENT, QUICK RECOVERY

Other benefits of partnering with an occupational health care provider are immediate attention for patients and personalized follow-up services that can reduce the amount of time a worker might later spend off the job or performing light-duty tasks.

"When injuries do occur, workers can go to the clinic to be treated," Kruth said. "If an injury occurs during the night, the occupational clinic has a doctor on-call to evaluate them, rather than a doctor who is not familiar with the patient's job."

Sailing adds that workers can receive excellent care in an occupational

clinic because doctors are familiar with the company's workplace. "Physicians that don't know anything about our company can't provide the same level of care because they don't know what we do," he said. "Many doctors will send the injured worker to a specialist in a few days; whereas Concentra will look at an injury, x-ray it, and get to work with physical therapy immediately."

Concentra aims to involve patients in the treatment and follow-up to injuries. "Patients have a chance to speak one-on-one with doctors," Covington-Kearns said. "When we refer them out, we have a network of referrals, and patients can be seen quickly."

Concentra also develops a return-to-work plan with employers and injured workers. "We help get them healthy and

back to work with restriction and light duty as appropriate—and not losing days," Covington-Kearns said. "We provide at-home exercises and physical therapy for patients. We give them some responsibility, so they take action to help themselves get better. They usually respond to it very well."

This sports medicine approach that keeps injured workers active while they are recovering can also help prevent false injury claims, says Sailing. "They have the physical therapy and rehabilitation services for you right there—and they make sure that you come back tomorrow so they can see your progress. If it's not truly an injury, people heal really quickly, because they don't want to stay with it. This way, if workers are injured they get the best

care, and if they're not, you get rid of false claims."

Sailing recommends that company owners and managers evaluate their health care services to ensure that workers are getting good care. "The individuals that are in charge of a company should interview their clinics about what they can offer—so they will get to the employees and follow-up with them—and so it's not just like anyone walking in the door. If a company is not happy [with their provider] they should look for something else, even if the clinic is farther away."

And going that extra mile for your workers—to ensure rapid recovery from injuries and no lost-time accidents—will be worth the effort. ★