

Occupational Health Group is a service offered to the business community of North Alabama by Huntsville Hospital and Decatur General Hospital Systems

## Keeping Workers Working

by James F. Gauthier M.D., M.P.H. Medical Director, Occupational Health Group



According to the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) only a small fraction of medically excused days off work is medically necessary. From a medical point of view, most people with on-the-job injuries can generally work at something without doing further harm. Put another way, most excused days off work result from a variety of non-medical reasons such as administrative delays, lack of alternative duty work, ineffective communications, or other logistical problems.

Early Return to Work (RTW) programs have proven to be highly effective in containing and reducing the cost of workers compensation. An early RTW program is designed to facilitate the earliest possible return of injured or ill workers to the workplace, to perform meaningful, productive work within their physical capabilities.

### Benefits to the Employer:

- Reduces the likelihood of malingering and/or fraudulent claims
- Saves indemnity expenses in temporary disability payments
- Receives some production for wages paid (once worker is out drawing lost time benefits, there is no production derived)
- Saves the cost of hiring and training replacement employees
- Facilitates employer/employee contact, giving the employer more control and direction, leading to a more positive resolution to the claim
- May speed healing saving medical expenses from a prolonged disability

### Benefits to the Employee:

- Increases their self-esteem, minimizing feelings of guilt for having been injured or ill
- Promotes better morale among all workers
- Contributes to faster recovery by keeping the injured worker mentally and physically conditioned to the regular work schedule
- Maintains social contact with fellow employees, which enhances recovery and encourages a faster return to the job
- reduces the negative financial impact many injured or ill workers experience due to lost time

RTW evaluations can be performed for a variety of reasons. Besides workers' compensation injuries where

such issues are addressed on each and every visit, any prolonged absence from work may need an evaluation to address RTW issues. Consider the following scenarios:

- A worker presents to their personal physician who has recommended extended time off until they are "100%"
- A worker who has experienced a major personal medical problem such as a heart attack, pneumonia, or an appendectomy shows up for work. Questions often arise such as: Can this worker lift more than 25 pounds? Work outside while it is hot and humid? Or perform repetitive bending, stooping and twisting?
- Perhaps a worker's physician has cleared them to return to work without restrictions. Is their physician actually aware of the kind of work they do?
- Having an occupational medicine physician familiar with your workplace review the RTW issues can be quite helpful

### Occupational Medicine Physician Role:

- Providing immediate, appropriate, and effective treatment that facilitates recovery and expedited return to work
- Assessing the abilities of the injured employee, and provide the employee with physical restrictions to follow when performing job functions
- Providing information about the employee's work capabilities to the employer and return-to-work coordinator
- Becoming familiar with operations at the employee's workplace

Once a worker is cleared by the physician to return to work, it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that the workplace culture supports a timely return to meaningful work. For example, employers can ensure that flexible work is available and that any restrictions, limitations or accommodations recommended by the occupational medicine physician are observed. Flexible work can include modifying tasks, schedules and environmental conditions to meet the temporary or permanent needs of the worker.

One final thought, a worker's personal health information is confidential. In general, physicians can not give information to anyone concerning the worker's medical condition without the worker's consent. The exception to this rule are the details concerning a workers' compensation claim. However, a discussion of a worker's functionality is not subject to confidentiality restrictions.

## U.S. Court of Appeals Places Hold on Part of D.O.T.'s New Direct Observation Rules

The U.S. Court of Appeals has placed a temporary stay on part of the newly revised Department of Transportation (D.O.T.) Rules regarding Federal DOT Drug Screens, 49 CFR Part 40, specifically the clause regarding direct observation requirements for Return to Duty and Follow Up Exams. The revision, which was to have taken affect November 1, 2008, would have made direct observation mandatory for all Return to Work and Follow-Up Drug Screens. Until the Court makes a ruling, the original rule stays in effect, which states that direct observation in those cases is optional per the employer.



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## Obesity Linked to Higher Worker's Compensation Claims

People who are overweight and obese tend to use more health care services than other individuals and are at a greater risk of morbidity and mortality. Now comes a report documenting that obesity is associated with increased workers' compensation claims and costs. A group of investigators conducted a retrospective study of 11,728 health care and university employees during 1997-2004. The researchers tracked workers' compensation claims, associated costs, lost workdays, and individual characteristics such as body mass index (BMI), age, sex, and smoking status.

Analysis of data showed that people with a BMI  $\geq 40$  had 11.65 claims per 100 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, compared with 5.8 claims among those in a normal BMI range. The obese participants also lost more time from work; 183 workdays were lost per FTE among those with a BMI of  $\geq 40$ , compared with 14.19 among those in the normal BMI range. Medical claims also were substantially higher, adding up to \$59,178 per FTE among obese employees, compared with \$7,503 per FTE among people with normal weight.

The results suggest that – considering the expenses associated with workers' comp – employers may want to invest in programs that encourage employees to lose weight and adopt healthier lifestyles.

*Ostbye T, Dement JM, Krause KM: Obesity and workers' compensation. Arch Intern Med 167:766-773, 2007.*

### Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce Business Expo



Andrea Calloway and Audra Campbell, Marketing and Business Development, for Occupational Health Group (OHG), attended Huntsville/Madison County Chamber of Commerce Business Expo at the Von Braun Center, October 23rd. This year's theme was "A Smart Place to Shop." The Expo is open to the public and offers several free 1-hour training sessions about marketing and business development in the Huntsville area as well as displaying booths from 200 local businesses that were exhibiting at the Expo.

### Employee Spotlight: Theresa Mays, Practice Administrator



Theresa Mays is the Practice Administrator for the Occupational Health Group in the Huntsville and Madison Clinic. She has managed every aspect of the clinics daily operations for the past 13 years. Theresa has been with OHG since May 1993 where she started working at the front desk. She has acquired an enormous amount of clinic operational experience along with the technical aspects of occupational medicine. Theresa strives to exceed the expectations of our customers by staying focused on providing care and services with excellence, respect, honesty, flexibility and dedication.

## Flu Vaccinations Going Strong

According to the CDC, Flu season in the United States generally starts in January and February, so they recommend getting the flu vaccine as early as possible, after it is available, to give people a chance to develop their immunity, especially those that are at higher risk from the virus e.g., the elderly and the young. OHG will continue to give Flu Shots through December. The vaccination is available to companies and the public at any of OHG's three clinics in Huntsville, Madison, and Decatur. If you are a company that has over 25 employees that want to be vaccinated, our Wellness Services can come on-site to deliver the vaccination. The cost per person for vaccination in the clinic is \$30.

The cost per employee for on-site vaccination is:

Over 500 participants	\$25.00
301- 500 participants	\$26.00
101-300 participants	\$27.00
51 -100 participants	\$28.00
25 - 50 participants	\$30.00

### OHG Directory

Administration.....	(256) 922-6675
Marketing and Business Development.....	(256) 922-6677
Billing Department.....	(256) 922-6673
OHG - Huntsville.....	(256) 265-7000
OHG - Madison.....	(256) 774-7300
OHG - Decatur.....	(256) 353-4325
Wellness Services.....	(256) 922-6699

[www.OHGonline.org](http://www.OHGonline.org)

### Holiday Closings

All OHG clinics will be closed in observance of the following holidays:

Thanksgiving	November 27th & 28th
Christmas	December 24th, 25th, & 26th
New Year	December 31st after 2:00 January 1st - 2nd



Wishing You and Yours  
Happy Holidays



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