



Australian Government

Comcare

FACT SHEET No. 6

Information for General Practitioners

*Rehabilitation and
return to work policy
and strategies*



Executive summary

The Commonwealth workers' compensation scheme has a very strong focus on early intervention and occupational rehabilitation.

The *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* (the SRC Act) gives an employer the power to determine that an employee should undertake a rehabilitation program and to arrange with an approved rehabilitation provider for the provision of a suitable program.

The success of a rehabilitation program depends on the willing cooperation of all the stakeholders including the employee and their general practitioner.

Occupational rehabilitation

Occupational rehabilitation is the process of returning an employee who has suffered an injury or illness to the workplace. All Australian workers' compensation schemes recognise the benefits of rehabilitation to both the injured employee and the employer and provide for rehabilitation.

The SRC Act has a very strong focus on rehabilitation. The SRC Act requires Commonwealth employers to take responsibility for the rehabilitation of employees with work related injuries. The case manager is appointed by the employer to manage this process.

Comcare has developed Rehabilitation Policy Guidelines and a return to work model to help employers and case managers exercise these responsibilities.

Rehabilitation policy guidelines

The SRC Act gives an employer the power to determine that an employee should undertake a rehabilitation program and to arrange with an approved rehabilitation provider for the provision of a suitable program. The SRC Act also requires an employer to take all reasonable steps to provide an employee who is undertaking or has completed a rehabilitation program, with suitable employment or to assist the employee to find suitable employment.

Return to work model

The return to work model focuses rehabilitation on return to work and aims to run concurrently with medical treatment wherever possible.

The focus on return to work is intended to enable the injured employee to know where they are headed and what is expected of them. Where rehabilitation is successful and injured employees do return to work, they can more easily resume their former lifestyle.

The key elements of the occupational rehabilitation model are

- return to work activity should commence as soon as possible after the injury
- the employee's workplace and specific pre-injury duties are the focus of the planned return to work activities
- where a return to work program is necessary, the injured employee will have an individual program tailored to their needs
- the employer is responsible for the close management and monitoring of return to work programs in consultation with treating health professionals and specialist rehabilitation providers

- employees are required to actively participate in the development and implementation of their return to work programs
- the employer takes action to ensure further workplace injuries are prevented.

Early intervention and return to work strategies

Most injured employees will be able to return to their pre-injury employment with their pre-injury employer. However, for those who cannot do this assistance can be provided to enable the employee to return to modified or alternative duties.

Employers can adopt a range of practices to assist employees' return to work such as

- planning rehabilitation programs that recognise the existing skills, experience and capabilities of individual employees
- providing workplace training and placements, where appropriate
- utilising retraining and redeployment programs when it is not possible to return an employee to their previous duties
- making arrangements with an approved provider to provide quality services tailored to the workplace or a specific injury type.

How can treating doctors help their patients get back to work and prevent long term disability?

How successful a return to work program is, whether to the employee's pre-injury employment or to different work, will be dependent on the willing participation and cooperation of all the stakeholders, including the employee and their treating doctor.

While some injured employees may not consider a return to employment in their original agency as desirable, their best prospect for occupational rehabilitation and eventual return to work may still lie with their own employer. Most agencies will have return to work policies in place which require them to facilitate employment opportunities for their own injured employees. However, obtaining an ongoing position in a new agency can at times be difficult.

While an injured employee may advise their treating doctor that they cannot return to work in their department or agency, the treating doctor may want to discuss this perception independently with either the case manager or the rehabilitation provider before making any recommendation. In many cases, the employee's own organisation may well be able to accommodate their requirement for alternative or modified duties.

Comcare's Interagency Job Placement Program — a pilot program for employees who are unable to return to their original employment following an injury

Comcare has recently introduced, with selected agencies, the *Interagency Job Placement Program*. The program supports agencies to broker suitable job placements for injured employees across a selection of agencies. Comcare's approach to rehabilitation allows agencies to seek a suitable work placement for an injured employee with another agency after it has been established that the employee cannot return to work with their current employer.

Comcare's analysis of claim information indicates that there is a small number of employees who for legitimate reasons are unable to return to their original employment following an injury.

Comcare has developed the *Interagency Job Placement Program* in recognition of the number of lost opportunities to quickly and effectively rehabilitate injured employees to productive work when suitable jobs are not available in their immediate workplace.

In the past the outcome for many of these employees has been a loss of connection with work followed by the onset of chronic illness and unemployability.

The *Interagency Job Placement Program* aims to prevent this occurring. The program emphasises the need for precise medical information that focuses on the capacity of the employee to participate in work.

The program enables key people (employer, doctor and job placement provider) to focus on the injured employee's capacity for productive work. This focus requires active commitment from agency managers to identify suitable job options with assistance from a skilled job placement provider.

The program was introduced in late 2002 and is currently being piloted with selected agencies. At the end of the 12 month demonstration project, the program will be evaluated to determine the outcomes achieved and the broader application of the model to other agencies.