

## Workers' Compensation Medical Care: Improving the Quality of Care for Injured and Sick Workers

**P**roviding high-quality medical care for injured and sick workers is a serious concern. For some workers, delays or difficulties in accessing high-quality medical care may actually result from the non-clinical aspects of workers' compensation, such as liability disputes between employers and employees and lack of communication among patients, employers, providers, and insurers. Research is underway to document these types of problems and understand their implications for quality.

But research has begun to shed light on medical issues related to workers' compensation medical care as well. Studies have demonstrated large variations in the use of health services for specific conditions treated under workers' compensation programs in different states.<sup>1</sup> And where there is variation in care there is often variation in quality.

For example, one study raised questions about the management of work-related low back pain by identifying frequent overuse of diagnostic imaging tests, variations in the use of prescription drugs, and high use of therapies with unproven effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Another study found that many of the nearly 70 percent of injured workers who underwent spinal fusion surgery had their level of pain increase as a result of that surgery.<sup>3</sup> Raising additional concerns, another study found that although back surgery improved long-term outcomes, workers' compensation recipients were less likely to get that surgery than patients who had not received workers' compensation.<sup>4</sup>

Concerns about the quality of workers' compensation medical care, including the appropri-

ateness and timeliness of care, access to care, and workers' experiences with care, have increased with the growth of managed care and its emphasis on controlling health care utilization and costs. At the same time, employers and workers' compensation insurers are increasing their use of provider networks and other ways of restricting workers' ability to choose or change providers.

For some, these trends raise the question of whether quality takes a back seat to cost concerns under workers' compensation. This issue is especially troubling because, unlike general health care, where patients can often choose a health plan, injured workers are more limited in their ability to choose providers and health care systems. They often have less freedom to act on unsatisfactory or even bad experiences with their health care providers.

*What, then, is the best way to assure that injured workers receive high-quality care?*

In the general health care setting, several approaches have been developed for measuring and improving the quality of care, including continuous quality improvement programs; research into the outcomes of care; the development of quality indicators, performance benchmarks, consumer-oriented satisfaction and functional measures; and introduction of treatment guidelines. Recognizing their potential benefits and limitations, these same approaches now need to be applied to workers' compensation medical care.

### Does quality take a back seat to cost concerns under workers' compensation?

<sup>1</sup> Miller, T.R. and D.T. Levy. 1999. Geographic Variation in Expenditures for Workers' Compensation Hospitalized Claims. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. 35(2):103-111.

<sup>2</sup> Tacci, J.A. et al. 1999. Clinical Practices in the Management of New-Onset, Uncomplicated, Low Back Workers' Compensation Disability Claims. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. 41(5):397-404.

<sup>3</sup> Franklin, G.M. et al. 1994. Outcome of Lumbar Fusion in Washington State Workers' Compensation. *Spine*. 19(17): 1897-1903.

<sup>4</sup> Atlas, S.J. et al. 2000. Long-Term Disability and Return to Work Among Patients Who Have a Herniated Lumbar Disc: The Effect of Disability Compensation. *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery - American Volume*. 82(1): 4-15.

In fact, some progress is being made on this front. Several activities are underway as part of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Workers' Compensation Health Initiative (WCHI).

- *Building Systems of Accountability.* Managed care organizations caring for workers' compensation cases should be held to the same level of accountability as they are under general health care. The American Accreditation Health Care Commission is leading a national effort to develop and validate a set of performance measurement standards for managed care organizations that treat workers' compensation patients. These standards will be modeled after those developed for health maintenance organizations by the National Committee for Quality Assurance.
- *Changing Clinical Practice.* Evidence-based treatment guidelines are being developed for improving patient care. With support from the WCHI, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, the Mid-America Coalition on Health Care, and the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry are all involved in projects to evaluate the use of various treatment guidelines for occupational health and disability management.
- *Establishing Effective Assessment Programs.* Routinely assessing the health status of workers may help identify serious problems early and keep them from getting worse. In Maine, the Maine Medical Assessment Foundation is helping to design and test new processes for routine health assessment in the workplace and to construct a centralized, statewide database on workers' compensation medical care to aid clinical decision-making.
- *Creating an Information Infrastructure.* Few data sources currently contain detailed information addressing the quality of workers' compensation medical care. A large consortium of researchers directed by investigators from the University of Texas-Houston School of Public Health is working to develop a standardized data collection methodology that will serve as the foundation for a national

research database for studying outcomes and quality in workers' compensation medical care.

- *Providing Resources for Improvement.* To ensure that important information reaches key stakeholders, the WCHI has awarded two grants to establish model resource centers in Rhode Island and California. These centers, housed in state workers' compensation agencies, will collect and disseminate information about how to improve workers' compensation medical care for the benefit of injured workers, employers, insurers, and health care providers.

The good news for injured workers is that interest in improving the quality of workers' compensation medical care is expanding. The challenge is not only to continue and advance this area of research, but to translate the knowledge gained into improved medical care for injured workers. ●

*This fact sheet series was created by the Workers' Compensation Health Initiative, a national program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The goal of the Initiative is to support innovations in workers' compensation that will contain costs and improve the quality of care provided to injured workers. For more information, visit the program's web site at [www.umassmed.edu/workerscomp](http://www.umassmed.edu/workerscomp).*

#### EMERGING TRENDS IN QUALITY

- Clinic-based databases to track treatment and work-related outcomes
- Standardized surveys for use in working populations
- Purchaser interest in demanding high-quality care that focuses on return to work
- Testing standardized measures of quality for use in workers' compensation medical care
- State certification of workers' compensation providers