

Billings Clinic's Responses to Medical Provider Panel Questions

Economic Affairs Interim Committee

November 17, 2009

SJR 30 Workers' Compensation Study

Question: What changes would benefit the workers' compensation system to help:

- Move an injured worker from a temporary total disability to either temporary partial disability or permanent partial disability of permanent total disability?
- Determine the degree of impairment?
- Determine whether a person has reached maximum medical improvement?

Billings Clinic Response: Billings Clinic is the largest workers' compensation medical provider in Montana. We employ two board certified occupational medicine physicians with 30 years of combined experience in assessing and treating individuals with work related illness or injury, as well as medical consultative services to employers.

It is our philosophy and strength to utilize medically appropriate work restrictions and if the worker is able and the employer can accommodate, to support early return to work. We support utilization of the American Medical Association Guide to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment Sixth Edition and believe it clearly outlines the process to determine the degree of impairment. We readily acknowledge that occupational medicine specialists are a small number in Montana and that a limited number of other physicians chose to be treating providers in the workers' compensation system.

We would encourage this committee to consider creating a State-level Medical Director of Workers' Compensation that actively offers training to providers on medically appropriate restriction.

Question: Are changes needed to improve responses from insurers, employer, and attorneys?

Billings Clinic Response: Currently the system requires preauthorization for medical or rehabilitative care beyond the initial 30 days and 12 visit threshold. Billings Clinic believes that this practice often causes unreasonable delays affecting patient progress and ultimately expedited return to work. We understand the need to protect the state from excessive cost by allowing a "blank check" however, a balanced and flexible approach with qualified providers should be considered.

We are encouraged by the Work Safe MT program and would encourage the State to consider incentives such as a reduction in the workers' compensation insurance premium for employer participation in this program and creation of limited duty or early return to work roles.

Question: Dealing with demands from an injured worker for alternative treatment or test that the medical provider does not think necessary?

Billings Clinic Response: This issue is not a big concern for us. We are comfortable as physicians just saying no to alternative or additional tests we do not think are medically necessary or proven. The Workers' Compensation System should be confident to support these

recommendations. We do understand that there are only a few occupational medicine specialists in the state and that this issue may be real for some treating physicians.

Question: What policies might help improve availability of medical providers familiar with workers' compensation needs and demands?

Billings Clinic Response: As mentioned before, additional treating physician training and the support of a State-level Medical Director of Workers' Compensation could motivate additional medical providers to participate, thereby improving access and availability. Creating a proficiency amongst treating physicians that is measurable, i.e. continuing education that is updated periodically that qualifies providers for an additional reimbursement i.e. fee schedule tiers could be an incentive. Perhaps that same proficiency could be utilized to lessen the preauthorization process.

Workers' Compensation does not currently reimburse for professional visits performed through interactive video conferencing (telemedicine). The availability of a specialty consult through telemedicine could motivate additional medical providers to treat workers' compensation cases.

Question: What differences are there between workers' compensation patients and people injured off the job and how could those differences hurt or help the system?

Billings Clinic Response: Studies support that there are secondary gain issues at play in the workers' compensation system. It is therefore important to have incentives in the system for employers to have transitional return to work mechanisms available and in place.