



Help warranted



By Gail Johnson

WorkSafeBC nurse advisors work closely with employers and health care providers to get workers back on the job safely and successfully.

With more than two decades of nursing experience to her credit, Cheryl Walilko has seen it all: gashes, fractures, amputations, and more. But as a WorkSafeBC nurse advisor, she does much more than help people who've been hurt on the job heal their wounds.

One of 80 nurse advisors across B.C., Walilko pours her energies into getting people back to work safely and successfully. It's a job that requires as much medical knowledge as interpersonal skills, practicality as compassion.

"Nurse advisors bridge the gap between the insurance, medical, and business worlds, with the ultimate goal of promoting health," Walilko says. "The first thing we do is to develop a relationship with the worker. Nurses have medical knowledge, but they also have the ability to listen."

When someone gets hurt on the job it can have far-reaching implications, affecting physical, mental, emotional, and financial well-being. The process of getting back to work requires careful planning so that the employee's health is never compromised.

"Workers are immediately relieved when they realize we can help," Walilko says. "They might be under a lot of stress; there's a lot of fear that comes with injuries. If, for example, someone is diagnosed with a back injury, they might think the worst. But we can work with them to explain that there are things they can do. A lot of our job is about education."

Jan Beesley, WorkSafeBC manager of nursing services, says that early intervention is crucial. Research shows that if a worker is off the job for more than six months, the chances of returning are low. "The workplace can be the best place for rehabilitation," Beesley

WorkSafeBC nurse advisor Cheryl Walilko discusses shop floor safety solutions with Howard Eckersley, safety manager at Tree Island Industries in Richmond, B.C.

explains. “It’s not about getting the worker better to get them back to work. It’s about getting them back to work to get them better.”

Nurse advisors step in during the recovery phase, up to 12 weeks following the date of injury.

During that time, their responsibilities are multifold. They provide clinical advice on typical injury duration, identify workers’ abilities and establish graduated return-to-work (RTW) plans, assist with recovery and treatment, and oversee follow-up medical investigations. They also help with serious injury intervention, hospital discharge planning, and home care.

Nurse advisors are on the move

An integral part of nurse advisors’ role involves visiting job sites.

“We will go to a site and we meet the worker and employer and review the work environment,” Walilko says. “A large part of what we do involves recognizing work that might be beyond workers’ current capabilities. And we often assist them with ergonomic issues related to their recovery.

“We review the job demands, break down the job into manageable parts so it’s appropriate for the worker’s injury, or we have that worker assigned to another area. We focus on the worker’s abilities, because abilities are what allow you to move forward.”

In fact, Beesley says workers are often able to stay at work following an injury, once the employer has offered them modified duties.

Nurse advisors also act as collaborators and communicators, keeping in regular contact with workers, employers, doctors and other health care professionals, and unions.

And, if they spot a safety hazard at a worksite, they’ll contact a WorkSafeBC prevention officer to ensure the problem is addressed.

“We aim to educate the employer, so they don’t feel it’s punitive to ask WorkSafeBC for help in following the codes correctly.”

Howard Eckersley, safety manager at Tree Island Industries, which manufactures wire products, says that nurse advisors like Walilko make the return-to-work process smoother and more efficient.

“She’s taken the time to visit our facility and become knowledgeable about our operations and the graduated RTW program,” Eckersley says. “With her medical knowledge, she can work closely with us to develop a customized program that fits the

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unique needs of the injured worker. And, if we need to clarify a worker’s medical capabilities, she can get through to a doctor quickly or make a decision herself, if that’s appropriate.

“She’s part of our team,” he says. “Having her involved really helps ease people back to work. When she says ‘I’ve taken a look at the site, and here are tasks you can do,’ employees are more receptive. They’re willing to do modified duties because they’ve been reviewed and okayed by a health care professional.”

Eckersley says that although no hard data exists on whether nurse advisors have helped lower the company’s claim costs or duration, “based on our experience, I strongly believe they do.”

Jamie Andersen, health and safety supervisor at Regency Fireplace Products, says that nurse advisors have helped him sort through conflicting or confusing medical information.

“A lot of times there are mixed signals between what the physiotherapist says and the worker’s own doctor says,” Andersen explains. “Even if someone looks to be 100 percent, they might have underlying issues. When there’s an injury to the muscles, diagnosis can be very difficult.”

Beesley explains that each case is unique and that nurse advisors take into account a worker’s specific circumstances.

Tips on working with a nurse advisor

- Nurse advisors step in anywhere between zero and 12 weeks following the date of injury.
- Barriers to successful RTW include an outdated belief that workers must be “100 percent better” before their return, that there are no or very limited options for modified or alternative work, and that RTW planning takes too much time and takes people away from “real work.”
- Nurse advisors assist employers by providing a formalized return-to-work (RTW) plan that should include a detailed schedule, a breakdown of duties to be performed at various stages, duty expectations, and any other special instructions. 