Joint Launch of a Comcare Better Practice Guide, Canberra

Launch of Return to Work, Workers’ Compensation Case Management, A Better Practice Guide

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Auditor-General for Australia
I am very happy to be invited today with Meryl Stanton to the launch of the document: **Return to Work, Workers’ Compensation Case Management, A Better Practice Guide**.

As you may know, this project had its beginning in a performance audit which the ANAO conducted in 1995 and 1996. During that audit we examined case management across a range of agencies and identified a number of examples of better practice. The report included an appendix of those better practices which we thought could also be used constructively across the Service.

Comcare saw the potential to use the better practice guide from the report more broadly. Meryl suggested to us that a stand-alone better practice guide to Case Management could be a more effective publication to assist agency managers. She noted that Comcare could use a joint ANAO/Comcare Guide as a means to heightening managers’ awareness of workers’ compensation case management principles and processes. I know that Meryl is particularly keen to enlist management’s support to ensure optimal outcomes for workers’ compensation case management within their agencies.

I was very pleased for the ANAO to work with Comcare on this joint project. Our officers have put together a very readable, user-friendly set of principles and ideas for better practice which I expect to be very useful to a range of agency managers including those not yet involved in work related injuries and case management.

The ANAO is always interested in opportunities where it can assist with a particular project or work with its clients to promote ongoing benefits from an audit. These days we are developing a greater number of better practice guides from our audit work which is increasingly generic in its approach. Our aim is to maximise the benefits from the lessons learnt during the audit and make them available across the service.

The discipline involved is in the follow-up audit processes where we would expect to see that the issues had at least been addressed and, where applicable, evidence of progress, if not completion, of cost effective implementation of better practice.

To ensure the widest possible availability for the Guide, we have placed it on our internet site from today. It can now be accessed from offices all over Australia as well as internationally. I know there will be interest in many other audit offices as well.
We are very aware that the workers’ compensation and rehabilitation process is highly complex. It involves significant emotional, financial, legal and policy issues as well as having marked implications for people’s quality of life in general and their quality of working life in particular.

Although all stakeholders are essentially focused on the same outcome (the return to work of the injured employee), there can be apparent conflicts from time to time between the human and the organisational motivations. It is important that stakeholders are pragmatic, as well as sensitive, in their approach to the rehabilitation of injured employees. These characteristics are likely to engender confidence as well as a willingness to cooperate in situations where the reverse could easily be the case.

Case managers are the linchpin in successfully returning injured workers to work. A principal conclusion of the ANAO audit is that agencies generally have not fully recognised the importance of actively managing the return to work of an injured employee, inter alia, as a means to reduce the costs of workers’ compensation. I hope that this Guide will be a useful vehicle to get that message across to agency managers.

In all such areas experience generally indicates that the key component for success is effective leadership within agencies. Effective leadership in workers’ compensation case management involves the commitment from management to ensure that the incidence of workplace injury, absenteeism and lost productivity is kept to a minimum. This puts the onus on managers to encourage and initiate credible preventative measures. At the same time it is important that, when injury occurs, management’s commitment to effective and efficient case management is highly visible and that proper process is followed. However, as with other elements of our responsibility, the primary focus should be on achieving cost effective outcomes. It is important that managers at all levels communicate this ethos in the workplace and that it becomes part of the organisation’s culture.

It is also important that the agency’s policy on case management is formally endorsed by the executive and preferably includes a preamble or statement of commitment by the agency. The management of each agency should incorporate into its governance processes clear procedures for reporting and accountability by the management of any workplace injury. Agency management should require regular reports on the performance of its return to work practices and procedures and progress against goals and planning targets, conduct reviews at suitable times and ensure effective follow-up action if performance needs to be improved. Of course, managers also need to ensure that those responsible know when they are doing well.
You may know that the ANAO is currently conducting a performance audit of the management of occupational stress. This is another area where Comcare is committed to improving agency practice and the efficiency and effectiveness of return to work policies, practices and outcomes. We hope to table that report in mid-1997.

I am confident that the better practice guide relating to Workers’ Compensation Case management will live up to the authors' expectations and prove to be a useful resource in raising the awareness of managers at all levels across the Service of their role and responsibilities in improving outcomes and performance.

It is called a better practice guide because best practice is a moving target, it is constantly changing, and there are always new ways to improve and develop. We do not see this as a static document. Both agencies will be happy to receive any comments on how it might be improved. Again, you could use the internet E-mail facility, the address is included in the Guide, or you can forward comments direct to Comcare.

As I said at the outset, I am very pleased to participate in this launch today, and use the opportunity to publicly thank Meryl Stanton for both the idea and encouragement as well as the cooperation of her staff. Congratulations to the authors. You have enhanced public management and thereby contributed to a better performing public service.