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## CULTURE CHANGING CAMPAIGNS IN VICTORIA AUSTRALIA - TO REDUCE WORKPLACE INJURIES AND RETURN INJURED WORKERS TO NORMAL WORKING LIVES

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### ABSTRACT

Between 1992 and 1996, the Victorian workers' compensation system turned around a \$2.1 billion deficit by limiting access to benefits, shifting journey claims to the statutory third party transport accident insurance, and by focusing public broadcast campaigns on the return to work and the prevention of high-priority risks according to the available claims information. The approach represents a new and more active approach to the role of workers' compensation insurance and the reduction of compensation costs according to public health priorities.

For contractual reasons the television spots referred to cannot be distributed over the Internet. For further information please write to the Author, VWA, GPO Box 4306, Melbourne 3001 VIC, Australia.

### BACKGROUND

In 1992, Victoria had the worst workers' compensation record in Australia. Its government-run scheme, WorkCare, had achieved very little in the reduction of workplace injuries, the number of reported claims was growing each year and the length of time workers were off work, on benefits, was leading the scheme to bankruptcy.

In a state of approximately 4.5 million people, WorkCare had a deficit of \$2.1 billion the second highest average premium rate of 3% of payroll and 16,000 long term claimants - ie. claimants who had been receiving benefits for at least a year - many of whom had been receiving benefits for the whole 7 years of WorkCare.

Under WorkCare, Victoria seemed to have developed a type of 'compensation' culture. There was little incentive for employers to provide safe workplaces. Nor was there much incentive for workers to return to work, even after injuries that were relatively minor. Compensation was looked upon not just as a 'right' but almost as a 'reward' for injury.

A change of government in October 1992 resulted in major new workers' compensation legislation, WorkCover, which came into effect on 1 December 1992.

## NEW LEGISLATION AND PREMIUM SYSTEM

The new WorkCover legislation limited access to benefits for workers who were able to work to two years, while improving benefit levels for seriously injured workers. Injuries sustained in journeys to and from work were no longer compensable by WorkCover but became the liability of the Transport Accident Commission. For an injury to be compensable, work had to be a significant contributing factor.

The premium system was changed to an experience based system - to provide financial incentives for employers to provide safe workplaces and to offer return to work opportunities to injured workers.

It was recognised, however, that legislation and incentives alone could not solve Victoria's workers' compensation problems.

## THE PUBLIC BROADCAST CAMPAIGNS

To change the Victorian compensation culture, WorkCover began major cultural changing public broadcast campaigns. These activities included publicity in all media, seminars across the state, distribution of several million brochures, displays and exhibitions, hundreds of speeches to the target groups of employers, workers and doctors, training programs with unions and employer bodies and major multi-media advertising campaigns.

### *Return to work*

The major return to work campaigns began early in 1993. These campaigns included publicity in all media, publications - brochures, newsletters - audio and video tapes, seminars, public speeches, displays and electronic, print and outdoor advertising. However, a series of television commercials formed the central core of the ongoing campaigns.

The first campaign introduced the new scheme and explained the amended premium system to employers together with its inbuilt financial incentives. These incentives were designed to encourage employers to reduce injuries in their workplaces as well as helping any injured workers to get back to work. Two separate commercials, "Balls" and "Elevation" demonstrated the impact of claims and their duration on employers' premiums in the new experience based premium system. A third commercial in the series, "Call him", promoted the gains in productivity that could be achieved by bringing back injured workers.

While return-to-work initiatives made sound business sense, some employers needed a reminder that they also had moral obligations - to look after staff who had been injured at their work by offering re-employment. The commercial "Scrapheap" compared failure to offer return to work with throwing injured workers on the scrap heap.

Employers were told of their regulatory obligations to plan, in advance, how they would handle any workplace injuries. In the commercial "Restaurant" return to work plans were compared to the careful planning required in preparing meals and menus.

Doctors were another group whose support was a crucial factor to the success of our 'return to work' strategy. One commercial which obtained very high awareness ratings asked "What sort of doctor sends an injured worker back to work?" The answer given was "a doctor who cares".

Another commercial targeted at doctors stated "When your doctor says what you can't do, ask what you **can** do". A third "doctor" commercial claimed that "return to work is the best medicine".

Whatever the primary target audience, messages for workers were threaded through all the advertising. However, there was still a need to directly inform them of the advantages of a speedy return to work, while promoting their right to work. The "Clocks" commercial showed how slowly and depressingly time passed when away from work compared to the faster and more satisfying time when feeling useful back in the workplace.

Another commercial, “Basketball”, featured a paralympic basketball star stating that return to work “really keeps you on the ball”.

Most injured workers can return to their original jobs. Others, however, need modified duties, retraining or a change in work practices. One commercial, “Return to work”, highlighted those options while reflecting the satisfaction of being back in the workforce.

The return to work figures improved dramatically throughout the various campaigns. Ninety percent of claimants were back at work within eight months of their injury. The average time off work had also dropped - from 28 weeks under the previous WorkCare scheme, to 11.4 weeks under WorkCover.

### *Prevention*

Now that the ‘compensation’ culture was becoming a ‘return to work’ culture, we could begin to focus on preventing injuries. We initiated the development of a safety culture.

The initial stages of the prevention of injury campaigns concentrated on improving general workplace culture and work practices. The need for strong communication between employers and workers was an early theme. One version of the improved communications message targeted employers and was shown at the start of a commercial break; “WorkCover told me the experts on safety in my workplace were my workers - so I talk to them”. The other version, for workers, was screened at the end of the break; “Our boss does something radical - he talks to us”.

Better work practices were also promoted - the employers’ version (“Job Rotation, boss”) followed, at the end of the break, by the workers’ version (“Job Rotation, worker”).

And when we produced commercials promoting fitness programs for sedentary workers, we followed the same employer/worker formula (“Truckie boss”, “Truckie worker”).

Targeting employers and workers separately was again a successful strategy when recommending warm-up programmes for manual workers (“Limbering up boss”, “Limbering up worker”).

However, to make sure that everyone began to see workplace safety as a concern, employers, workers and the community had to become aware of the tragedy that is workplace injuries (“Roads”, “Graveside”, “Cyclist”). We backed up these messages with others that reinforced the need for worker safety to take precedence over everything else (“Steel boss”).

Having dealt with the more general problems that related to many workplaces, we next used our research to identify specific types of injuries to target (Rechnitzer et al, 1994). Falls was one. We found that when the danger is obvious, precautions are generally a matter of course. However, many accidents happen when the job is seen as routine - falls from low heights is one example. The commercial “Sky High” showed a window cleaner 30 storeys up the side of a building pointing out the safety precautions he took because he knew his job was dangerous. He said it was workers “down there” who took risks because they did not recognise the dangers.

This was followed by the “Ladders” commercial which showed a painter levelling the feet of a ladder on uneven ground using a wedge of wood. This commercial had a humorous approach but the message was deadly serious.

Forklifts are another important priority (Larsson & Rechnitzer, 1994). One commercial, “Christine”, highlighted the need to separate pedestrian workers from vehicles by making a forklift into a monster chasing a worker.

Back injuries make up 25% of our injuries with the majority caused by poor manual handling techniques. We promoted lifting devices as a way of avoiding backstrain. The commercial “Stone Age” again had a humorous approach, comparing how stone age man lifted rocks compared to modern workers using

various lifting devices. It pointed out that employers who did not utilise these devices for their workers were really back in the stone age.

And because young people are over-represented in injury statistics (Larsson, 1988), strong emphasis was focused on young, inexperienced or untrained workers. The commercial "First Day" featured a supervisor showing a new worker how to use a machine. The supervisor explains how he was injured on his first day on the job - no-one had trained him how to operate the machine. "I pushed instead of pulling and broke three fingers on my hand - that was how we did things then!"

Another commercial aimed at young workers, "Bear Trap", received the highest awareness level of WorkCover's safety advertising. It featured a fearsome looking bear trap to represent all dangerous machinery in the workplace. A young worker is blindfolded ("sending your workers in blind") and put in a room with the bear trap. As he gropes in the dark, his hand nears the trip spring. The viewers do not see what happens but hear the "snap" of the trap. The commercial urges "don't let the first day be their worst day".

"Bear Trap" was subsequently sold to Worksafe, the Australian federal OH&S body, and shown nation-wide.

The over-riding theme of the safety campaigns has been on encouraging employers to have safe workplaces and practices. Some commercials, however, were designed to show the cost and consequences when safety slips from top priority ("Big road", "Guilty").

#### *Regional intervention*

The Authority decided in late 1994 to take a much more active role in injury prevention. The advertising campaigns were now directed to injury prevention rather than return to work and regional and industry-specific programs were put in place. One such program was "Operation Safety" conducted in the Ballarat region during 1995/96. Ballarat is a provincial centre in a semi-rural district with around 125,000 inhabitants and a varied industrial structure about 150 km northwest of Melbourne.

The strategy for "Operation Safety" was based on selective priorities for prevention, a regional approach to the problem - and the solutions, and the use of local problems and solutions as input for a local media campaign.

The Victorian Workcover data was used to set the priorities. A measurement of severity was applied to the claims data files of the Workcover Authority and some jobs and tasks were found to be associated with more severe injuries than others; ie. injuries which more often put you in hospital, more often give you permanent medical impairment, and more often keep you off work for long periods of rehabilitation.

Injury severity was deemed to constitute an important priority; associated tasks should be targeted for prevention. In the Ballarat region the obvious priorities pointed towards over-exertion and strain injuries in manual handling tasks among, particularly, transport workers and nurses.

Transport workers and nurses alone represented 15 % of the workers compensation payed for serious injury in the region between 1992 and 1994.

The intervention had to be a combination of visits to establishments and messages sent in the mail and via public broadcast. A mail-out was done to the 1,560 regional establishments in transport, manufacturing, retail, hospitality and nursing, who, in all, employed 1,300 transport workers and some 2,400 nursing staff.

Researchers visited and analysed risks and manual handling problems at around 60 industrial and nursing establishments in the region. The problems encountered - and their potential solutions - were used for feature articles in the regional newsprint or reports or interviews on local radio. For nine months in 1995-96 the local media were flooded with stories about manual handling problems in transport and nursing - and reports about local ingenuity and inventiveness in finding solutions to these problems.

At the same time, three specially made television advertisements, based on the Ballarat priorities in transport and nursing, were screened exclusively over the Ballarat region. The three commercials each demonstrated the use of lifting devices - one for unloading trucks, one for moving heavy objects in store rooms and one for lifting patients in hospitals.

In order to reach more people and companies with our message of better work practices, smarter equipment and better ways to do the job, an 8 ton truck was equipped with a selection of the most up-to-date manual handling equipment that could be borrowed, and this display truck travelled around in the industrial areas of the region for a month in November-December 1995 showing flexible roller conveyors, vacuum lifts, overhead hoists, drumhandling equipment, trolleys, containers, steps, stairways and ramps to more than 600 representatives of the targeted industries.

In evaluating “Operation Safety”, the severe injury claims of Ballarat were compared to the rest of the State and to the severe claims of another region in Victoria.

**Lost time claims (percentage of increase/decrease) 93/94, 95/96**

	Victoria	Ballarat region	Comparing Ballarat to Victoria
all industries	+ 16 %	- 18 %	- 34 %
road transport	- 4 %	- 16 %	- 12 %
nursing	+ 6 %	- 22 %	- 28 %

**Claims costs (percentage of increase/decrease) 93/94, 95/96**

	Victoria	Ballarat region	Comparing Ballarat to Victoria
all industries	+ 45 %	+ 28 %	- 17 %
road transport	+ 24 %	+ 12 %	- 12 %
nursing	+ 44 %	+ 1 %	- 43 %

(Larsson et al, 1997)

The results from the evaluation indicate that, in terms of severe claims and their associated costs, the Ballarat region was significantly different from the rest of Victoria; the region had shown a dramatic comparative reduction of injuries and their costs during and after “Operation Safety”.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The successful results of the return to work and safety campaigns have been obvious. The impact of these campaigns, together with the legislative changes and premium incentives, was a 30% improvement in the return to work rates and a 40% reduction in the total number of reported claims. Within 2½ years, the \$2.1 billion deficit was eliminated and the scheme became fully funded. The premium rate was continually reduced and, as of 1 July 1996, it was down to an average of 1.8% of payroll, a saving of \$500 million annually for Victorian employers.

But while many of the problems in the workers’ compensation system have been addressed, there is still a great need for real improvement in workplace safety throughout the state. The positive results from “Operation Safety” indicate that great reductions in severe workplace injury - and real improvement in workplace safety - indeed are possible, through continued research, targeted intervention campaigns and applied prevention activities in workplaces.

The Victorian WorkCover Authority is committed to continuing its campaigns towards ensuring a safety culture.

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