

Insights on Case Management in Workers' Compensation

By Myra Keleher, DNP, RN, CDMS, CCM

Case managers in workers' compensation are often underestimated by those who aren't familiar with our important role in the industry. Our efforts to help injured workers navigate the complex health care system are sometimes viewed as simple cost-cutting measures. In reality, our sole purpose is to ensure that injured workers receive the best possible care as soon as possible to help expedite an efficient and safe return to work.

Over my 20-plus years in the industry, I have witnessed the effects of our contributions daily. From the construction worker who returns to the worksite after undergoing surgery and rehab for a repetitive stress injury, to a police officer who rejoins the force after sustaining a devastating on-duty spinal cord injury thanks to adaptive equipment—workers' comp case managers make significant impacts on the lives of injured workers.

So why are we underestimated? Perhaps it's because we're so dedicated to the welfare of those committed to our care and the complexity of our busy work schedules that we don't stop and educate others about what we do.

Essentially, when an employee is injured, the case manager's role is to assess and interpret information related to a claim and identify areas in need of intervention or support. Case managers

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collaborate with the worker and their family, coordinate and communicate with all providers on the care team, and provide valuable claims insights and updates to claims professionals and payers on new jurisdictional requirements, new guidelines from employers, and new risks within the workplace.

Case managers are expected to

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advocate for the injured worker, while also representing the interests of the employer. They must stay abreast of physician networks and ancillary providers for respective customers. They are responsible for carefully documenting each case, noting when an injured worker's treatment is following accepted guidelines or when it's fallen outside a normal course of treatment for the diagnosis.

As branch manager of Genex Services' Lake Mary, FL, office, I'm responsible for day-to-day operations, as well as meeting annual performance and financial goals. I also recruit, hire, and manage a staff of 30, most of whom are telephonic nurse case managers, who work remotely.

These work-at-home positions are in high demand, as they afford nurses

a great deal of independence and flexibility. Many nurses are looking to transition away from the high pressures of a hospital setting and want to move into business management.

When hiring, I primarily look for nurses with relevant certifications (eg, CCM, CDMS, CRRN, and COHN) and at least a year of experience in case management, preferably in workers' comp, but I also accept case managers who have med-surg, orthopedic, emergency department, or ICU experience.

Aside from providing telephonic case management services to the Southeast, my office also handles several national customers, which is why I manage nurses across the country. For national accounts, nurses may sit in one state, but must be licensed in multiple states and be familiar with the case management requirements in all the states for which they manage cases.

Telephonic case management is most effective when used within 90-120 days of the injury. Proactive customers get our case managers involved from the day of injury, or as early as possible. Other times, case managers are assigned cases when injured workers are forced to miss work due to their injuries. Our case managers then facilitate getting the employees back to work, either in a modified capacity or full duty.

It's a complicated job, so I work to ensure our case managers have a manageable workload and adequate administrative support. At Genex, we support

Insights on Case Management in Workers' Compensation

continued from page 8

the development of our nurses both in terms of opportunities for advancement and continuing education. Every year, we offer approximately 50 free CEUs to nurses internal to our organization.

Continuing education is also important to keep up with this challenging field, which is always changing. Aging baby boomers and the growing incidence of obesity present new comorbidities and increased injury risk and severity. We strive to stay at the forefront of developments to help facilitate the best-possible results.

What's exciting is the plethora of emerging solutions to assist in our jobs. For example, with the proliferation of sophisticated case management software, smartphones, tablet computers, and video conferencing, there are more tools than ever at our disposal.

The potential applications in workers' compensation are endless. Case managers are leveraging telehealth to better coordinate treatment and ancillary services, improve discharge planning from hospitals, and help educate injured workers about tapering off opioid prescriptions. In short, it's a great time to be a case manager in workers' comp. **CM**

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8 CareManagement April/May 2017