Delayed Recovery Prevention, Communication and Causation – A Clinical WC Perspective

2016 DWC 23rd Annual Educational Conference

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DELAYED RECOVERY

Part I
What *is* delayed recovery?

- What is “slow” RTW?
  - ODG Definition
  - Where does ODG data come from?
- TTD
  - Pernicious impact on return to work
  - Why setting restrictions helpful
    - Allow you to follow progress even if it's TDD
- How does an adjuster identify a patient with delayed recovery?

What causes treatment delays?

*Logistical Issues*

- Failure to recognize co-morbidity.
  - DM, DJD/OA, psychological factors, obesity, etc.
- Contact /scheduling difficulties.
- Missed appointments.
  - Try to reschedule immediately.
- Records not sent.
- Unclear/poorly defined responsibilities.
What causes treatment delays?

Interpersonal Issues

• Doctors uninformed about UR/IMR process.
• Doctors think it is adjuster responsibility to provide records.
• Contact difficulties d/t avoidance.
• Inconsiderate behavior making both sides avoidant.

How can adjuster help treater?

• What does adjuster need to do to facilitate?
  o Provide awareness & Information.
    • E.g., of alternative duty, past history, etc.
  o Supply medical records from other providers.
  o Educate on WC process.
    • E.g., “Does P&S mean patient can't treat any more?”
What does adjuster need to do to facilitate?

• Provide awareness of alternative duty.
  o Doctors often unaware (or misled)
  o Get the Job Description to the doctor!

• Need for restrictions even if no alternative duty available.
  o “TTD” pernicious
  o Can follow progress as restrictions improve

• Provide medical records from other providers if needed.
  o With proper releases

Take-home messages on Delayed Recovery

• Practical value of always getting doctor to define restrictions.
  o Even if no Alternative Duty available

• Recall that “TTD” has a pernicious impact.

• Understand and correct for some causes of treatment delays.
  o Records not sent
  o Inconsiderate behavior
  o Missed appointments
  o Failure to recognize co-morbidity
  o Unclear/poorly defined responsibilities
Has this happened to You?
Or this?

Or THIS ?!?
Your Overall Direction/Goal

You want to facilitate coordination and cooperation.

Kaplan’s Communication Tenants

• Common identification
• Mutual high regard
• Effective Communication
• Will to Work

Sylvan J. Kaplan, PhD
Common identification

• You share something in common.
  o Welfare of the patient
  o Other goals (e.g., no complaints)
  o Organization or institutional affiliation

• Overlapping interests.
  o Rapid cure
  o Expeditious RTW

Mutual high regard

Consciously hold the person you are communicating with in high regard.
Effective Communication

- Set of complex skills.
- Typically develops over time.
- Often idiosyncratic to a particular relationship.

Will to work

- Not passive.
- You have to **want** to get along.
- You have to **want** to communicate.
- Need positive intention to **actually make something happen**.
Kaplan’s Communication Tenants

• Common identification
• Mutual high regard
• Effective Communication
• Will to work

Use Basic Communication Skills

• Always give your provider due respect.
  o Don’t patronize or assume motives
• Put yourself in the providers’ shoes.
  o Injured workers are “Patients” [NOT ‘claimants’]
• Use common courtesy.
  o ‘Please’
  o ‘Thank you’ (and mean it)
  o ‘I very much appreciate your assistance’
Some Thoughts on Approaches

• Start with
  o “How is your patient doing?”.
  o Then LISTEN to the answer.

• Be brisk
  o Know what you want to achieve before you call.
    • Next step(s), restrictions?, MMI date prediction?
  o Quickly Bring doctor up to speed on relevant info.
    • ONLY if relevant.
    • “There have been 3 new developments…”
    • Provider past deficiencies mentioned ONLY when absolutely necessary.

Communication Recommendations

Try first to understand
  o “Can you help me understand what issues are preventing the patient from improving?”
  o Use reflective listening, “So you are hopeful the patient will be able to return to modified duty next week?”

Use 3rd person
  o “It appears that…”
    • [NOT “Your office never…!”]
  o “It would be helpful if this could be arranged.”
    • [NOT “I want you to do this.”]
  o “The chart notes indicate…”
    • [NOT “You said….”]

Ask, do not demand
  o “Are you able to say…”
  o “Any sense this might allow him to do light duty, now or in a week or two?”
  o “Could you help me understand…”
End on a positive note

• How things end up is remembered the longest
  • Research on colonoscopy memory failures show if procedure ends well, later memory of it is much more favorable.

Take-home messages on Communication

• Mutual high regard, common identification and effective communication will prevent delays.
• Use non-confrontational communication on the phone and in letters.
• Understand some treatment delays are personal, some logistical – and act accordingly.
Part III

Let’s Review Causation

“Logic is a poor model for cause and effect” Gregory Bateson

• The DWC administrative director adopts and incorporates into the MTUS ACOEM Practice Guidelines chapters on:
  o Prevention.
  o General approach to initial assessment and documentation.
  o Initial approaches to treatment.
  o Cornerstones of disability prevention and management.

• Useful resource:
  o ACOEM Practice Guidelines, Chapter 4, “Work-Relatedness”
6-Step Causation Analysis: NIOSH

- What is the diagnosis?
- What are the known causes?
- Is this patient exposed to known causal factors at work? Elsewhere?
- Is the work exposure sufficient to have caused the current diagnosis?
- Are there other risk factors present?
- What is your conclusion?

Causation Concepts

- Two primary clinical situations that need to be considered when providing your work relationship opinion:
  1. Do you have substantial evidence to
  2. State with reasonable medical probability (not medical certainty and not medical possibility) that the patient’s presentation is consistent with a work etiology?

- If you don’t have substantial evidence, ask for what you need.
  - E.g. a job description, review of prior records, additional diagnostic information, etc.

- Medical probability
  - This means that you have clinical/evidence-based justification for your opinion and can defend your opinion if questioned.
Does computer use cause injury?

“One of the first things taught in introductory statistics is that correlation is not causation. It is also one of the first things forgotten.”

-Thomas Sowell

Where are these injuries?

The neck?  The forearm?
What about here at the carpal tunnel?

Early Reviews

- NIOSH: Bernard 1997
  - Evidence for CTS associated with repetitive work.
  - Evidence for CTS associated with forceful work.
  - Evidence for CTS associated with hand/wrist vibration.
  - Strong evidence for CTS associated with force plus repetition.
  - Insufficient evidence for CTS with extreme postures.

- CONCLUSION:
  - Therefore, given that computer use is repetitive, computer use may be associated with CTS.
CTS Risk Factors

• Physiologic Observation:
  o Increased carpal tunnel pressure is associated with median nerve function.

• Rempel et al.
  o Wrist postures associated with increased CT pressure.

• Keir et al.
  o Mouse use associated with moderate CT pressure increase.
  o Other studies suggest typical computer keyboard postures would have modest increased CT pressure.


Which one meets these criteria?

Light rapid finger motion?  Forceful grasping with vibration?
CTS Risk Factors

Prospective Studies

- Gerr et al. 2002.
  - Positive association between computer use and various musculoskeletal disorders.
  - This study suggested that computer use was a risk factor for development of CTS.

- Andersen et al. 2003.
  - No association between keyboard use and CTS.
  - But association found w/ mouse use of > 20 hrs/week

Modern Reviews

- Thomsen et al., 2008.
  - 3 studies that had possible misclassification showed an association between computer use and CTS.
  - 3 studies found Risk levels < 1.
    - Protective against CTS or no association!

- van Rijn, et al., 2009.
  - “Jobs with the highest risk of CTS included work in the meat- and fish-processing industry, forestry work with chain saws, and electronic assembly work (OR = 76.5, 21.3, and 11.4, respectively).”
  - “The occurrence of CTS was associated with high levels of hand-arm vibration, prolonged work with a flexed or extended wrist, high requirements for hand force, high repetitiveness, and their combination.”
  - “Contradictory findings were reported for associations between computer work and CTS”.

Modern Reviews

• Andersen et al. 2011
  o CTS:
    • 3 reviews focusing specifically on carpal tunnel syndrome
    • Consistently concluded that epidemiological evidence for computer use and the occurrence of CTS is insufficient.
  o Upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders:
    • When considering prospective studies and accepting the inclusion of clinical criteria incorporated in some of the reviews, the evidence seems moderate or even limited for an association between computer use and UEMSDs.


The final word?

• Mediouni et al. 2015 (double study, both prospective)
  o The Cosali cohort (France):
    • CTS diagnosis based on symptoms and exam c/w CTS.
  o PrediCTS cohort (U.S.):
    • New hires with baseline history, physical and nerve conduction test.
    Then follow up history, physical and NCT.
  o In both studies:
    • Jobs with the highest computer use had a protective odds ratio in comparison to other jobs.
      o Cosali cohort OR=0.39
      o Predi CTS cohort OR=0.16

Take-home messages on Causation

- *Initial assessment and documentation is crucial to accurate attribution*
- *Causation only stated with reasonable medical *probability*
  - *Not medical certainty nor medical possibility.*
- *AND (despite the conventional wisdom to the contrary), research to date shows:*
  - “Jobs with the highest computer use had a protective (!) odds ratio in comparison to other jobs.”

Communication Sample Conversation

(Dr. Kurt Blunt and Adjuster Harmony Jones)

Appendix
Sample Adjuster Conversation (1 of 3)

- Adjuster
  o Hello Dr. Blunt, my name is Harmony Jones and I am an adjuster at Premium Insurance. I am calling concerning John Fallbottom.

- Dr. Blunt
  o I’m pretty busy …

- Adjuster
  o Thank you very much for taking this call - I will be brief. Whenever someone is out more than a couple of weeks part of our approach is to ask for specific information about of the patient’s function and response to therapy.
  o How is your patient doing?

- Dr. Blunt
  o Not as well as I hoped. Well he can’t stand or drive for more than ½ hour; he can’t walk more than 2 blocks without sitting down. He can’t lift more than 10 pounds.

- Adjuster
  o That is very helpful, thank you. Could you also let me know what functions he can perform? For example, can he cook or shower by himself? Type at a computer?

Sample Adjuster Conversation (2 of 3)

- Dr. Blunt
  o Yes, he can do all those things, though he can only type for about 30 minutes before he has to briefly lie down.

- Adjuster
  o That helps a lot, many thanks. Are you able to say if his pain level has improved recently compared to prior visits? Also, any feel for when he might be able to return to alternative duty?

- Dr. Blunt
  o Well he’s not improved much lately – and return to work return to work is hard because he has to lift bags of cement all day. Is there any alternative duty?

- Adjuster
  o No, not until he is able to lift at least 50 pounds and work at least 4 hours per day. If you would like I can fax your office a current job description.
  o One more thing, can you please put in your notes what restrictions he would have if light duty were available? Specific work restrictions are very helpful for following Mr. Fallbottom’s improvement over time.
Sample Adjuster Conversation (3 of 3)

- Dr. Blunt
  - Yes! Thanks. A job description will help.
- Adjuster
  - Is there anything else that would assist with your care of the patient?
- Dr. Blunt
  - He said he had had some injections in the past but could not remember when or where he was injected. Can you get these records?
- Adjuster
  - I do not know, but I will speak with the patient and see what we can come up with. I will let your office know what we find out.
- Dr. Blunt
  - Thank you.
- Nurse B:
  - I really appreciate your assistance, and your willingness to put specific restrictions in your office notes going forward.
  - I really appreciate your time.
  - Thank you so much for helping and good luck with your patient.