

REHABILITATION IN THE FOREST INDUSTRY

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Figure 1 - Spring-assisted bolster arm

ABSTRACT

The financial cost of accidents to the Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation (ACC), and ultimately the forest industry, is extremely high. One method of reducing this cost is through the use of rehabilitation. Some rehabilitation techniques are already being used by logging contractors to enable their injured workers to return to work quickly. The

rehabilitation techniques currently used could be increased and diversified with help from the ACC who offer a number of rehabilitation options. This report attempts to increase industry awareness of the area of rehabilitation by presenting a number of contractor or worker initiated rehabilitation case studies. As well, two examples of how the ACC can provide financial assistance to achieve early returns to work are presented.

INTRODUCTION

In New Zealand the Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation (ACC) spent \$705 million on weekly benefit payments for the year ending June 30, 1994 (ACC Annual Report, 1994). Of this \$705 million, just under \$9 million (ACC, 1995), was spent in the forestry sector. There are two main methods for reducing the present level of compensation costs (Hursch, 1994). The first, and most obvious, is through a reduction in the number of accidents. The second, is through reducing the amount of time lost after an injury, which is where rehabilitation is involved.

Rehabilitation

There are several different types of rehabilitation, with vocational rehabilitation being of primary interest in this case. Vocational rehabilitation is a process that takes into account the physical recovery of injured workers and attempts to return them to work quickly without aggravating the current injury, using such techniques as job modifications, career counselling, retraining and job placement.

Workers not returning to work may face reduced income, loss of self-esteem, marriage and family breakdowns, substance abuse and illnesses not related to the injury (Curran, 1994).

The longer a worker is off work, the longer income maintenance (compensation) must be paid, and ultimately the higher the cost to the employer. During this period the lack of work not only costs the employee 20% of his normal wage, but may also cost the employer in terms of:

- production
- requirement for temporary employees

- an increase in overtime required to meet production deadlines
- the cost of training or retraining replacement labour
- an increase in the ACC premium paid.

In countries such as Norway, Finland and Sweden, special institutes exist which take care of the rehabilitation needs of the forest workers. One such example is the Hernes Institute in Norway (Vik, 1984). The Hernes Institute has been in operation since 1954, when the Institute was set up to deal with musculo-skeletal problems of workers in forestry and agriculture. The Institute attempts to get the injured workers back to suitable work, preferably that which they were engaged prior to the injury. They attempt to achieve this through a special emphasis on training in correct working techniques.

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CASE STUDIES

During a number of current LIRO studies, some examples of rehabilitation were uncovered. The first three case studies presented in this report were initiated by contractors. All three cases use the rehabilitation technique of "light" or "alternative" duties to enable the worker to return to work earlier than would have normally been possible. The last two case studies illustrate two methods by which the ACC can assist in facilitating an early return to work.

Case Study 1 - Contractor-driven

A breakerout, engaged in a line shift, was walking up a fallen stem on his way to move the back block. As he neared the end of the stem, his spiked boots slipped on an area of the stem with no bark. The breakerout fell forward and landed heavily on the stump, resulting in one broken rib and a ruptured kidney. He spent the next week in hospital under observation, and a further week at home. After this two-week period, he was still unable to return to work as a breakerout as he was not fully recovered, and could have quite legitimately stayed at home for at least one more week. However, both the contractor and the breakerout wanted the breakerout back at work as soon as possible. The contractor allowed the breakerout to come back as the hauler operator, rather than have any more time off. In this case, light or alternative duties (operating the hauler) were used to return the injured breakerout to work more quickly than would have normally been possible.

Case Study 2 - Contractor-driven

While sharpening his chainsaw, a skid worker slipped and cut a tendon in the index finger of his right hand. The skid worker had seven days off work, but after this period was unable to use a chainsaw as his whole right arm was still in a cast. Not wanting to have any more time off than necessary, the skid worker returned to work assisting the log maker, mainly holding the end of the log maker's tape and marking the stacks. This worked well for both the contractor and the skid worker as it meant the contractor was back to his full complement of workers. The skid worker benefited by quickly returning to full pay.

Case Study 3 - Contractor-driven

The third example was when a faller badly dislocated his ankle and damaged three ligaments. The faller's leg was put into a cast and he was given four weeks off work

by his doctor. Half-way through the second week the injured worker decided to discuss with the contractor the possibility of returning to work the following week on light duties. The injured worker had about four years experience operating a loader and had sat and passed the appropriate Forest Industry Recognition of Skills (FIRS) module. The worker returned to work and operated the loader two weeks earlier than would have been possible if there had been no opportunity for light duties. This example would have saved the ACC approximately \$1,400 (assuming the faller is paid \$175 a day). Of this, 28 cents in the dollar, or \$392 (assuming the contractor paid an ACC premium of \$20,000) will be returned by the ACC as a discount on the next premium paid by the contractor.

In this case, the injured worker may never have been able to return to work as a faller, as the ankle is unlikely to return to its full strength.

Case Study 4 - ACC Supported

A skidder operator damaged his back in a skidder rollover accident. The operator had been off work for over a year because of this accident and was keen to return to work. However, there was some doubt as to whether his back was up to operating a skidder. The injured worker approached the ACC who allowed him a five-week transition period back into full time work. The first week he spent working two hours a day, and the next week he worked two hours on, two hours off. The third week the operator worked half-days, followed by full days for the last two weeks. During this five-week transition period, the ACC continued to pay the operator and if at any time the operator had felt unable to carry on he could have stopped work and the ACC would have carried on with his payments.

This example shows the benefits of ACC assisted rehabilitation. Without the ACC's

assistance, it is unlikely that the skidder operator would have returned to work. In this case, full rehabilitation was achieved and the operator is currently the full time skidder operator for his original crew.

Case Study 5 - ACC Supported

A Nelson transportation contractor broke his right ankle in a fall from a ladder at home. The injury was compounded by the fact that the worker's left ankle was weak from a work-related accident 18 years ago. Six months off work was required due to the necessity for the worker to get on and off the truck's deck to raise and lower the bolster arms and to insert the extension pins. These tasks require the operator to have good balance. To reduce the period of recovery, it was necessary to develop a method of undertaking these tasks without climbing up on to the truck deck. The operator found that it was possible to have the truck fitted with spring-assisted bolster arms and extension pins that could be raised or lowered from the ground. The cost of fitting this system was approximately \$4,000. As well as this, there was the cost of transporting the truck to Patchell Industries Limited in Rotorua where the alterations were carried out. ACC agreed to pay for the modifications to the truck and the cost of transporting the truck to Rotorua. This resulted in the contractor reducing his period of convalescence by two and a half months, as well as making his job safer and easier.

As a result of this rehabilitation initiative, serious thought should be given to fitting the modifications used here as a matter of course to all logging trucks and their trailers.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of light or alternative duties is the most common method of rehabilitation used within the New Zealand forest industry. This has been largely initiated by the contractors and their workers.

The ACC has a number of rehabilitation options available to contractors and their workers. The inclusion of ACC input into the development of contractor-initiated rehabilitation methods can produce effective results for all parties concerned.

The large amount of money being spent by the ACC in the forest industry has the potential to be reduced significantly, through the implementation of effective rehabilitation techniques. A significant reduction in the total cost of accidents in the forest industry should result in a reduction in the ACC levy and therefore the premium paid by employers within the industry.

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