

Costs to treat back injuries surge, without corresponding improvement in health status -- JAMA

InjuryFree's radical approach to prevention generates successful results at a fraction of the cost

Injuries of the spine (back and neck) are the most common injuries suffered by workers in manufacturing settings. Back and neck injuries are also among the most costly of reported medical problems, and those costs are increasing. According to a study recently published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), total estimated expenditures in the U.S to treat spine problems (back and neck) in 2005 were an astounding \$85.9 billion. That represents a 65% (adjusted for inflation) increase in spine-related expenses from 1997 to 2005. [1] According to the study, annual spine-related medical expenses exceed the costs of arthritis and are nearly equal to the costs for treating cancer. "Only expenditures for heart disease and stroke, estimated at \$257.6 billion, were substantially higher than those for spine problems," the report stated.

More remarkable still, the study acknowledges what many practitioners in and observers of the medical community have suspected: "These spine-related expenditures have increased substantially from 1997 to 2005, without evidence of corresponding improvement in self-assessed health status."

Without dramatic change, it is reasonable to assume that expenditures for spine-related conditions will continue to increase, with the same disappointing results.

What it means on the shop floor and the boardroom

American industry has largely come to accept certain levels of work-related injury and their resulting hard and soft costs. The JAMA study highlights what those responsible for paying the bills already understand: injuries continue to occur, and already massive costs continue to rise, with no visible evidence of improvement in health status. This is frustrating for workers who see their health deteriorating; and frustrating for management who see costs skyrocketing while production and morale slide.

A radical, new approach: prevention, not treatment

Someone very wise said, "If you want to make some changes in your life, you'll need to make some changes in your life." The same applies to the prevention of injuries in the workplace. If conventional prevention techniques have reached their practical limit of success, more of the same old techniques are not likely to generate any substantial improvements. Without a radically different and aggressive focus on prevention, most of a company's health care resources will continue to be spent on repairing already damaged workers.

Introducing the Employee Maintenance Center (EMC). InjuryFree has created a cost-effective way to manage musculo-skeletal issues on the jobsite, including spine-related injuries alluded to in the JAMA study. The focus of the EMC is on prevention.

Employee Maintenance Centers are a combination of physical testing laboratory, strength training center and rehabilitation facility. They are situated on-site in manufacturing plant locations, immediately accessible to the plant's line employees. They are flat-fee arrangements, so there is no cost to the employee for any of the center's evaluation, testing, care, or strengthening program services. As a result, utilization rates are extraordinarily high. Among the company's existing centers, nearly 70% of a plant's employees use the center at least once during the year.

Employees are helped, money is saved

The annual cost for preventative spinal services is less than \$300 at a typical InjuryFree EMC facility in a factory of 450 workers. Compare that cost of prevention to the cost of conventional medical treatment for spine-related injury. (The JAMA study refers to costs ranging from \$2,580 to \$6,096, and those are hard costs only. No attempt was made in the study to determine related soft costs.)

But even more importantly, EMC participating employees report outstanding results from EMC prevention services, ranging from the ability to return to work quickly, without pain, to avoiding surgical procedures altogether. This has a dramatic and positive impact on the worker and the corporation:

- Productivity is increased

- Medical-related hard costs are reduced

- Medical-related soft (indirect) costs are reduced

- Employee satisfaction is increased

The InjuryFree EMC model doesn't simply cost 90% less than the typical medical model of treating injuries once they occur. Rather, the EMC model is based on an entirely different approach to dealing with injuries - namely, prevention.

EMC costs are negotiated as an annual flat rate, which contributes significantly to their cost effectiveness. Included in the flat rate is a rental fee for all of the specialized equipment used to provide the breadth of services available in an EMC. There is no cost to the employee for services received.

One of the keys to the success of the centers is ready access. "Workers come in for 15 minute service sessions or workouts during their breaks, and before and after work," InjuryFree, Inc. CEO Trent Shuford explained. Rather than ignore a minor pain that has developed, workers will come in right away to talk to center staff about their problem and receive service. When an employee complains of a sore shoulder or back, that may be a tip-off that their strength level needs to be improved for the job task required of them. The EMC staff immediately puts together a strengthening plan focused on the joint and muscle group in question.

Employees tell center staff members that, prior to the arrival of the EMC in the plant, they wouldn't leave work to wait in a doctor's office; it was a nuisance and a costly loss of work time many simply wouldn't put up with. As a result, minor strains and injuries were often ignored until they turned into major pains and claims. Easy access allows the center to catch small irritations and minor injuries early, before problems escalate into major physical challenges and costly claims.

One plant reported that recordable injuries dropped from eight to zero in the first full year following implementation of an InjuryFree EMC.

“Every injury we help prevent saves our client companies a ton of money and keeps their employees working, productive, and much, much happier,” Shuford said.

InjuryFree EMCs offer a solution not often found in the business world today – a serious cost reduction program that employees recognize as a serious benefit.