

## **Occupational Health**

### **Cost-Effective Medical Case Management: Changes in the New Millennium.**

*By Connie T. Chuang, MD, MPA, MPH*

Employers across industries and insurers continue to realize the significant burden of controlling medical costs associated with workers' compensation, disability, ADA and FMLA claims. Drivers of such medical cost include an aging workforce, increased utilization and cost of medical services, new surgical procedures and pharmaceutical services. Medical case management (MCM) is a complex process that involves assessing, planning, implementing, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the available options and services to ensure the employee is receiving appropriate medical care at the correct time, duration and level. The underlying premise of MCM is based on the well-recognized and accepted scientific fact that an employee achieves the optimum level of well-being and functional capability at the workplace.

#### **What are the Key Components of Effective MCM?**

***Involve Multiple Professionals that Understand the Process.*** It is important to acknowledge that effective MCM is a collaborative process involving multiple key stakeholders that have the education, skills and experience required to render appropriate services at the right times throughout the case continuum. For example, expert occupational health physicians and nurses have the knowledge and skills to assist in developing a medical management action plan that aligns the employee's medical care goals with the job requirements at different stages of a case. In addition, such professionals have the unique understanding of the workers' compensation and disability systems, as well as a wide range of laws and regulations related to the interactions between work and health. They are key players of any successful MCM team.

***Obtain As Much Objective Evidence As Possible Relevant to the Case.*** There should be constant effort to obtain the most up-to-date medical and treatment records to continuously determine the medical necessity of treatment. For example, treating claims as "simple medical-only" cases when in fact they need more aggressive attention and resources, such as obtaining and reviewing the most recent treatment records, can play a significant factor in delaying the resolution of a workers' compensation claim. In addition, obtaining timely information that details the work performed by the employee is critical such as the employee's statement of the involved mechanism of injury, work tasks at issue, use of tools and equipment, and available controls. Time and motion studies and ergonomic analyses, when done properly, can provide biomechanical evidence with a focus primarily on the body parts allegedly injured. Information about the employee's work is especially helpful when causation of the alleged injury is of concern.

***Utilize Evidence-Based Clinical Practice Guidelines as a Routine Practice.*** Effective MCM requires the employers and insurers to ensure that treating providers are consistently utilizing evidence-based clinical practice guidelines, i.e., the current best scientific and medical evidence in making decisions about the care of the individual employee. For example, adverse health consequences of prescription

opioid analgesic use are a significant problem in the United States. MCM professionals need to be knowledgeable of the state-specific laws regarding opioid use, as well as basic evidence-based guidelines to ensure that treating providers are appropriately prescribing opioids for treatment of employees with pain not associated with cancer or palliative care.

**Maintain Effective Communication with Treating Providers.** Because evidence-base practices are not always utilized by treating providers, it is important that professionals are involved that can decipher and simplify medical jargon for employers and insurers to best determine causation and medical necessity of treatment. Again, occupational health physicians are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to not only ensure that the treating physician utilizes clinical practices that are evidence-based and consistent with standard of care, but to ensure that treating providers understand service expectations of the employer. Managing workers' compensation cases is outside the realm of "traditional medical model;" thus frequently making treating providers uncomfortable with returning an employee to work at an appropriate level of duty. Occupational health physicians and nurses have the expertise and experience to work with the treating provider to determine if an employee can safely be at work and complete essential job functions with or without appropriate work accommodations.

**Oversee and Preserve Quality of Independent Medical Examinations (IMEs).** Most IMEs are hardly worth the paper on which they are written, particularly when evaluations are not based on objective scientific and medical evidence. Guiding the IME examiners to assess and hone in on issues relevant to a claim is paramount to ensuring they play a functional role in effective MCM strategy. Pre-exam preparation of the best available scientific/medical evidence and medical records is key along with providing complete information pertaining to the job position at issue. Work information can be provided to IME examiners effectively and efficiently through the presentation of previously developed job-specific medical standards to assure that IMEs are performed with an occupational health perspective.

#### **How Do I Take a Proactive Approach to MCM?**

**Build and Maintain a Predictive Model.** Predictive modeling can enhance a workers' compensation insurer's ability to find red flags to guide employees toward more effective and less costly treatments, and even detect potentially fraudulent claims. Early identification and resolution of high cost claims are important as claims continue to age, costs mount quickly to significant amounts. "Risk drivers" associated with a high cost claim include claim characteristics, medical conditions, medical utilization, and prescription drug categories and utilization.

**Think Population Health Management.** Combining predictive modeling analytics and targeted population health management efforts can help employers develop effective strategies to drive down workers' compensation medical costs and promote employee health. Comprehensive employee wellness programs and projects that advocate population health can translate into realized cost-savings through better understanding of health risks, management of chronic diseases among the aging workforce, and promoting preventive medicine principles.

## **Summary**

As medical costs that employers put into managing their employees' health continues to rise, it is critical that effective MCM strategies be routinely used. Employers and insurers must involve professionals that have the knowledge, skill set and expertise to help steer cases in the right direction towards quick resolution by emphasizing evidence-based medicine and management practices to collaboratively formulate effective MCM action plans. No longer is a reactive approach alone to MCM effective to driving medical costs down. Employers must realize that proactive approaches such as predictive modeling and managing population health are essential to achieve reduced medical costs and promote employee health.