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State:

Nurse Triage Process Draws Increased Scrutiny: Top [2018-07-10]

Companies that are primarily providers of workers' comp nurse triage services may have an incentive to recommend self care for injured employees rather than an in-person or telemedicine visit to a doctor, according to one cost-containment company.

But the seemingly cost-saving strategy can backfire and actually increase costs, an official with Sedgwick said in a [blog post](#) last month.

"Some organizations that rely on triage as their primary revenue model create guidelines that will drive higher initial self-care direction," wrote Tracey Davanport, Sedgwick's vice president of clinical operations. "That creates a false economy that employers often fail to see."

Sedgwick crunched numbers from clients that had been using nurse triage from companies for whom nurse triage is the main line of business. Sedgwick's data showed that "over-aggressive" use of self-care increased average lost-time duration to 14.8 days as compared to 1.8 days, for claims valued at 12 months.

Several workers' comp cost-containment companies, including Sedgwick, CorVel and Coventry, offer around-the-clock or "24/7" nurse triage services. The service allows an employee to talk to a nurse by phone immediately after an injury occurs and receive advice on whether they can treat the injury themselves or if they should go to see a doctor. A telemedicine visit with a doctor is often an option.

With nurse triage, an employer can "err on the side of caution" and consult a nurse for what appears to be a minor injury, said Andrea Buhl, Sedgwick's senior vice president of clinically integrated medical programs. And supervisors don't have to make the decision on whether to send a worker to the doctor.

"It takes a lot of that responsibility away from supervisors," Buhl said on Monday.

When a triage nurse advises a worker to treat his or her own injury, an employer can record it as an incident only without opening a workers' comp claim, Buhl noted. But inappropriately recommending self care can increase costs further down the road, she said, citing as an example a tissue tear that worsens as an employee continues to work.

The key, according to Sedgwick, is to use appropriate guidelines in the nurse triage process. Buehl said one set of triage guidelines commonly used by medical call centers comes from Schmitt-Thompson Clinical Content. The guidelines are reviewed by panels of physicians and nurses with experience in telephone triage and are updated annually.

Company Nurse, a nurse triage service for workplace injuries, developed its own triage guidelines about 20 years ago because the leading triage guidelines available at the time focused on general health conditions for adults and children, rather than on occupational injuries.

The result was the first software product designed exclusively for the workers' compensation nurse triage management industry, said Paul Binsfeld, founder and president of Company Nurse. The product, called Enspiri, is used by Company Nurse and is available for use by other companies.

With Enspiri, a triage nurse asks and records answers to questions based on proprietary triage algorithms to identify the injury, recommend self-administered treatment, or refer to a clinic, doctor's office or hospital.

"By using an evidence-based triage method specifically designed for work injuries, employers can take care of both their employees and their bottom line," Binsfeld said.

David Donn, chief executive officer of San Francisco-based consulting firm Donn & Co., said nurse triage can be a useful early-intervention tool, but its effectiveness should be monitored.

"Ultimately the employer's own data and experience should be the deciding factor on effectiveness -- not necessarily the pool of data that the TPA or managed care company provides," Donn said.

The triage program should be benefiting the employer rather than merely serving as a "convenient source of self-referral for the TPA or managed care company to steer business to their other loss-control products like UR, field or telephonic case management," he said.

Another factor to consider is how much experience the triage nurses have with the client's specific industry.

Donn said that employers who are interested in nurse triage should test it on trial basis, checking results periodically and making needed adjustments.

Medcor, another company that provides nurse triage services for workplace injuries, said in a [newsletter](#) this year that nurse triage can help reduce unnecessary and costly emergency room visits. In addition, nurse triage can benefit an employer by reducing the number of OSHA-recordable injuries, which are a major concern for certain types of businesses such as construction contractors.