



**Rehabilitation and Return to Work Round Table:
Offshore Oil and Gas Sector of the Australian Shipping Industry**

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

Fremantle

6 March 2001

Rehabilitation and Return-to-Work Round Table: Offshore Oil and Gas Sector of the Australian Shipping Industry

Introduction

On 6 March 2001, the Seacare Authority conducted a Rehabilitation and Return-to-Work Round Table aimed primarily at shipping companies servicing the offshore oil and gas sector. Nearly 30 people attended representing shipping companies, maritime unions, rehabilitation providers, lawyers, the insurance sector and members of the Seacare Authority – held at the Royal Perth Yacht Club, Challenger Bay Annex in Fremantle.

The Round Table follows the Rehabilitation and Return-to-Work Symposium held in Melbourne in November 2000, which was opened by the Hon Peter Reith MP, the then Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

The purpose of the Round Table was to gather those involved in the rehabilitation and return-to-work process to share information and learn from others experiences in this important area as well as become involved in the development and improvement of injury management strategies.

This document summarises the key issues raised at the Round Table.

Welcome & Background

Mr Geoffrey Gronow, Chairperson of the Seacare Authority, opened the Round Table and welcomed all participants. Mr Gronow introduced the members of the Authority and outlined to all participants the statutory functions of the Seacare Authority.

Mr John Rowling, Deputy Chairperson of the Seacare Authority and Assistant Secretary, Safety and Compensation Policy Branch of the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, provided background information focussing on the issues, proposals and outcomes from the Rehabilitation and Return-to-Work Symposium held in Melbourne.

Rehabilitation Provider

Mr Andrew Cartmel, WA Working Life addressed the Round Table and provided background on what he sees as the rehabilitation providers role, as well as four case studies for discussion. WA Working Life has a broad range of experiences within the maritime industry with respect to vocational rehabilitation and injury management in the bluewater and the oil and gas sector on the North West Shelf and Timor Sea. They have dealt with environments aboard tankers, platforms, supply vessels and tug boats.

Key points raised by Mr Cartmel included:

- Primary emphasis needs to be on the employer/employee relationship – though support from a rehabilitation provider is fine, this would usually be as a support

role on behalf of the employer. In the offshore sector, the involvement of the employee associations is important – they are a constant (as well as a trusted ally) in the eye of the injured employee.

- The beneficial role of employee associations, being to:
 - provide a trusted reference point for the injured worker, when dealing with an unfamiliar situation; and
 - encourage compliance should the worker not be participating in accordance with statutory requirements.
- Injury management and rehabilitation is about a culture change, both for land based organisations, as well as the maritime industry.
- Early intervention by the employer/rehabilitation provider is critical. In the shipping industry this means making contact with the worker immediately on arrival onshore or on arrival at home city (where treatment takes place) eg meet at port, airport and visit hospital. This contact also involves the immediate family, particularly the spouse – to explain the process, options and support to be expected from the employer.
- Medical practitioner understanding of the work environment is essential. If the treating doctor does not understand the environment the employee will be returning to (unexpected movement of the vessel, confined spaces etc) the return-to-work could fail. Having an Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) approved medical inspector of seamen review the employee before returning to the vessel can help ensure appropriate timing for a return-to-work, particularly as a supernumerary.
- An understanding of the work environment is essential for a successful return-to-work. The rehabilitation provider visiting a workplace can assist in the understanding of the conditions and working environment faced by the returning worker. In the shipping industry it is essential that the rehabilitation provider visits the vessel to increase their understanding of the conditions and the demanding role faced by workers on return from injury.
- Visiting the vessel also assists in explaining to the Master and other relevant crew members what limitations the returning worker will have, and also to provide information on how to deal with the situation if the injury is aggravated etc. This also provides an opportunity for other crew members to raise questions they may have about the injured employee returning to the vessel (particularly important if returning as a supernumerary).

Return-to-work Information

Mr Rod Pickette from the Seacare Authority Secretariat gave a brief outline on Seacare data from the November 2000 National Return to Work survey. The survey is conducted by an independent consultant on behalf of the Seacare Authority, and most other workers' compensation schemes.

The data available to the Seacare Authority from surveys of injured seafarers in May and November 2000, indicate that:

- Return to work (RTW) is lowest in the Seacare scheme at 74% (national average is 85%);
- Opportunities for partial RTW are low or non-existent at 4% (Nat. avg 30%);
- Only 29% had a RTW plan or rehabilitation plan developed for them (Nat. avg 45%);
- Only 52% thought they had been given suitable duties on return (Nat. avg 76%);
- Seafarers perceive there are few positions where partial hours or duties can be accommodated; and
- RTW is driven by workers' desire to return regardless of medical opinion or workplace pressure.

General Discussions

Issues raised by participants at the Round Table include:

- Experience indicates that there are advantages to employers developing a policy on rehabilitation that is made known to all employees. Such a policy could include such things as:
 - can they manage a supernumerary position on board a vessel?
 - does the employer have a relationship with an approved¹ rehabilitation provider to call on at short notice?
- Communication between an employer, rehabilitation provider and treating doctor is critically important. The earlier a treating doctor can gain an understanding of the work environment on board a vessel the better. The employer or rehabilitation provider could provide information (such as a manual, photographs, video etc) to the treating doctor.
- While it is recognised that early intervention is important for a successful return-to-work, the geographical location of the employee needs to be considered. For example, if an employee is injured in the North West Shelf, flies home to Melbourne (where treatment occurs) and the employer is based in Perth, arrangements need to be in place for the employer to have an approved rehabilitation provider available in that home city to ensure the rehabilitation program can commence, and assist the employee to a complete return-to-work.
- It is important to gain the commitment of the Master and crew in advance of an injured employee returning to a ship as part of a rehabilitation program – particularly if returning in a supernumerary position.
- Industry best practice may be to ensure a second medical opinion is obtained from an AMSA approved Medical Inspector of Seamen prior to a return to work, in consultation with the treating doctor. This can be used as a back-up

¹ An approved Rehabilitation Provider list for your State/Territory can be obtained from the Seacare Authority Secretariat. Contact us on (02) 6121 7120 or by email on seacare@dewrsb.gov.au

opinion – to ensure all aspects of a returning worker’s capabilities and the likely conditions on board a vessel have been considered.

- Involving the insurer at an early stage so the employer is clear as to what the insurer will support – particularly important in retraining aspects of rehabilitation.
- There could be benefits by providing Seacare Authority guidance notes to the injured employee as well as the treating doctor by the employer at the earliest opportunity.

In Summary

Similar issues were raised at both the Melbourne Symposium as at the Fremantle Round Table. Early intervention by the employer or their representative (in a rehabilitation provider) is essential to ensure the injured worker understands the process ahead and is prepared along the way for a return-to-work.

Doctor (and other medical professional) awareness is also a necessary component to a successful return-to-work. Seeking a second opinion from an AMSA approved medical inspector of seamen may prevent an attempt at returning an injured worker before the appropriate time.

Open communication between the parties (injured worker, employer, rehabilitation provider, treating doctor) is essential to ensure that all participants have the same understanding of the process.

Seafarers Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Authority Response

The Seacare Authority discussed the outcomes of the Rehabilitation and Return-to-work Round Table at its meeting on 6 March 2001. The Seacare Authority is preparing a publication for employers to use when they have an injured employee that will require rehabilitation. This publication will provide employers with relevant information on the rehabilitation and return to work process – and raise some of the possible options available to employers. Watch the Seacare website (www.seacare.gov.au) for updates on Rehabilitation and Return-to-work.