



Australian Government

**Seafarers Safety, Rehabilitation
and Compensation Authority**

**Seacare
Conference 2006**

**Conference Summary and
Conference Close
Geoff Gronow, Chairperson**

Sumac, Melbourne

Thursday, 26 October 2006

CONFERENCE SUMMARY AND CONFERENCE CLOSE

Geoff Gronow – Alan, thank you very much indeed for leading a very informative session and you can be assured that the Seacare Management Group aided and abetted by the Authority, will be noting all the points that have been made. Alan, thank you very much and once again join me in thanking him.

Now comes the wrap up to the conference and I hope that you all agree that it's been a great success. I want to particularly thank the Seacare Management Group, with the assistance of the Comcare people, for the work that they've done in putting the program together and for organising the venue and making it run so smoothly. We are most grateful.

It has been apparent throughout the day, that rehabilitation and return to work are major issues for the maritime industry. The cost of workers' compensation weighs down the competitiveness of this industry, and we've all agreed that greater attention needs to be paid to getting injured seafarers off workers' compensation payments and safely back into work in an effective and durable manner and in way that there is no risk of re-injury. So rehabilitation and return to work performances is essential to improving the scheme's costs, as the long duration of some claims is a significant driver in insurance premiums.

On this front, I'm pleased to be able to say that the performance of the scheme has showed good improvement of late. When our annual report is released, you'll be able to see those figures.

The number of injured seafarers being assessed by their employers, for their capacity to undertake rehabilitation programs has increased markedly in the year 2005-2006 compared with the previous years, as did the percentage of those being assessed within the 28 days statutory timeframe.

Also the number of seafarers who commenced a rehabilitation program and who returned to work successfully rose significantly. Our data shows that when seafarers return to work after injury, the vast majority return to the same position on full duties. In fact, the rate is the highest of any scheme in Australia. This is obviously the preferred outcome, but in some cases return to work at sea may not be possible for all the reasons that we identified and discussed, so we need to look at alternative approaches.

However, there are areas where significant improvement is still needed. More Seacare Scheme employees, when they're injured, are having a return to work plan developed, compared with previous years. Yet, at just 30 per cent, the number of injured seafarers with a return to work plan in place, lags well behind the national average.

Also, the percentage of injured seafarers who benefit from a rehabilitation program is also much lower than the national rate. Rehabilitation and return to work programs are vital in securing the employee commitment to returning to work and such programs should be developed by the employer and the rehabilitation providers in consultation with unions and seafarers.

More effort needs to go into planning for rehabilitation with programs being more than the mere statement of intent. They must incorporate elements that are going to assist and encourage the injured seafarer in their efforts to get back to work. In some cases there must be a stronger focus on vocational retraining.

The longer it takes for injured employees to get back into the workforce the harder it is. People lose confidence, self-esteem, work fitness and so on. They are at risk of social isolation and depression and all the things that flow from such an injury. They are likely to develop a long-term off duty psyche which can be a self fulfilling prophecy. For these employees, we need to foster their attachment to the workplace and they need to be shown that they belong at work and they will need the employers help to see that this is done.

I hope you will leave this conference today knowing more about Best Practice Rehabilitation and Return to Work Strategies and how they can be fashioned to help injured employees to return to work in a safe and durable manner than you did when you came this morning.

As I've said today's program has been highly successful and stimulating and this morning we've heard from three senior industry figures speaking on the broader issues facing the maritime sector.

David Parmeter spoke of the Bluewater sector and talked about the ageing workforce, which is of course a key issue. He talked about the way the industry was changing and about the future - where will we get qualified seafarers? What's going to be the source? What training will they undertake and so on.

Duncan Telfer then talked about the Offshore Industry and he talked about improving OHS standards and about the challenges having regard to global standards. He talked about the need for intensive industry training and he mentioned NOPSAs and the work that NOPSAs are doing. I'm pleased to say that the Seacare Authority has met with NOPSAs when we were visiting Perth some time back. We've developed a relationship with NOPSAs, which I think will be beneficial to both them and to us. Duncan talked about the industry being dynamic and about the tremendous advances in technology and, for those of you who watched the slides go up, about the way in which the Offshore Industry was moving to different geographic locations and how they're doing deep drilling with very sophisticated equipment and vessels.

Mick Doleman came along and I just wanted to say, that I told Mick to be punchy. I didn't tell him to call the ship owners bastards. He talked about global economic issues and the effect upon Australian shipping. He talked particularly about sub-standard international vessels and the way employers treated their employees and, in some instances, really very poor behaviour. He talked about Australia's competitiveness with overseas employers with their lower standards of OH&S. He gave us some graphic examples of incidents at sea.

We then heard from Paul Baulch from Coles Myer, who told us all about his experience with insurance. He talked about his employers, Telstra and Coles Myer, and provided us with a very practical approach. Some of us were interested in his book published in 1935. The key note I think, of his address to us, was that he talked about integrated case management for each injury, and I think that's something that we could take onboard and consider.

The Return to Work Hypothetical which Peter Leslie ran was very informative and I thank him again and his panel for putting together that hypothetical with the assistance of Phil Beaumont.

Alan Clayton has just finished talking about the Round Table Discussion and we've got a number of points now recorded on paper for consideration, and Alan they will be considered.

So again, I would like to thank all the speakers and presenters for their contribution that have made the day such a success. It's been very heartening to the Authority that so many key participants in the maritime industry have made an effort to come here today. I know some of you have travelled long distances and I know those travelling for example across the Nullabor, make a big effort to come and we're very grateful to you for giving the time and making the effort to come to this conference and to take part in it as you've done.

It seems to me that the industry maintains a strong commitment to injury prevention and management and these conferences I think indicate that the Seacare Authority is willing to play such part as it can as a leader in the area to bring these conferences about and to put issues on the table for discussion leading to resolution.

This now brings me to two housekeeping matters. We have the Seacare Conference Evaluation Form in yellow and spare copies are on the table and we really would be grateful for your honest and considered opinions. You don't have to sign them, you can just mark the form with an x if you like, or put your name if you're brave. We will not be suing for defamation or injurious falsehood or any other course of action, but please be frank and honest with us. Tell us what you think about the conference to enable us to plan for our next conference and mend any matters that require mending when we're going about that planning process.

Next thing to tell you is that the dinner starts here in this venue with pre-dinner drinks at 7 o'clock. You have to check in with Bethany and Julie at the table, and they'll give you table allocations, nametags and whatever is needed so, just check in there when you arrive at or about 7 o'clock with the dinner commencing about 7.30.

So, I think that's really all I have to say. Again thank you very much for your attendance at the conference and your active participation, it's been really good. See you all tonight at the dinner and I hope we will have our usual enjoyable evening.

Thank you.