

# Happy 100th Birthday Workers' Compensation

## Safer Workplaces, But Older Workforce

By Frank Pennachio -  
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Looking ahead for workers' compensation in the coming decades, we see the best of times and the worst of times.

On the positive side, workplaces have never been safer and the frequency of report-

ed injuries has been on the decline for a long time. Automation and improved work practices have contributed to this decline, as well as a greater awareness that working safely is good business.

In addition, we now have evidence as to the best way to medically treat employment related injuries. Evidence based medical treatment guidelines are gaining acceptance and will continue to reduce the costs of injuries. Databases are also available to benchmark the optimal disability duration for injuries by diagnosis code. Data mining and management are relatively recent tools that can illuminate problems and identify interventions to improve outcomes.

Progress is slow, but there has never been more knowledge and expertise available to assist all stakeholders to reduce injuries and better manage injuries that occur.

However, the challenges facing workers' compensation in the coming decades are significant. The workforce is getting older and less physically fit. Many Baby Boomers can't afford to retire and will stay in the workplace longer. This is not such a big issue for clerical employees, but will be a problem for those who are engaged with physical labor. Obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure are on the increase which complicates and extends injury recovery.

Stakeholders will need to figure out a better way to address chronic pain costs. The overuse of narcotics and unnecessary surgeries usually causes more harm than good. It seems the results with current methods are not promising, but there is resistance to opening the door to non-medical interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. The chronic pain problem will not likely be solved with prescriptions and surgeries alone.

No one knows what impact health reform will have, but if 30 million new people have access to primary care doctors, it is likely to cause some problems for injured employees and employers. If timely access to care for injured employees is restricted or limited, all bets are off. ■

### Evidence-based treatments will continue to reduce injury costs.

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