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MEDIA RELEASE

COAL MINERS INJURY TOLL

Australian mining companies are being urged to provide better on-site health care for miners, with WorkCover estimating that the mining industry experiences almost twice the average incidence rate of workplace injuries.

The President of the Chiropractors' Association of Australia (NSW), Dr Kerein Earney, said back injuries represent 24 per cent of all major workplace injuries and cost \$138 million and involve lost time of 70,884 weeksⁱ.

"Getting staff back to work faster should be a priority for employers as a report released last year by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicineⁱⁱ showed the longer someone is off work, the worse their health and life expectancy becomes," she said.

"Employers have a responsibility to provide injured workers with the best possible treatment, to enable them to stay on the job or return to the workforce quickly and to lead active, pain free lives."

Newcastle Chiropractor, Dr Fred Stevenson, who has spent 12 years providing chiropractic care to miners at the coalface of several Hunter Valley mines, said many companies were now seeing the direct benefits of on-site care for employers and employees alike.

He said mining companies that provide staff with access to chiropractic care on-site are better able to provide a safe and healthy work environment, reduce absenteeism resulting from injury, and improve the wellbeing and productivity of their workforce.

"Healthier employees have a direct influence on healthier bottom lines for mining companies through a reduction in absenteeism, increased productivity, fewer health insurance and compensation claims, lower health care costs and reduced staff turnover," Dr Stevenson said.

"Working out of the first aid rooms at the Gretley Colliery near Wallsend, the Bulga Mine near Singleton and the Newstan Colliery near Lake Macquarie, I found there was no one walking around without a problem and very few without pain.

"In fact many of the miners I treated had been reliant on pain medication just to get through their working day.

"Miners often work long shifts performing physically challenging and repetitive tasks and are therefore at an increased risk of acute musculoskeletal injury and long term damage.

“The hard manual work performed by underground miners often leads to low back pain, while in open cut mines workers often suffer mid to upper back and neck injuries as a result of operating heavy machinery.

“Other common causes of musculoskeletal pain and injury in the mining industry include overexertion, vehicle jarring and vibration, being struck by objects, frequent bending and twisting of the trunk, lifting, slips, trips and falls,” Dr Stevenson said.

“By going down into the mines and sitting in the machines, I saw first hand the difficult working conditions and the industry-specific issues the miners faced. This assisted with the development of suitable treatment programs and also enabled me to provide advice to management about how to implement improved work practices.

“Once I’d cleaned up the old injuries I provided ongoing ‘maintenance’ sessions, including adjustments, stretches, massage and exercise prescription, which were popular with the workers who were often time poor and unable to seek treatment elsewhere.

“When the workers knew they could receive chiropractic care at work, often they would make the effort to come in, have an adjustment and put in a days work of alternate light duties rather than calling in sick.”

One of the miners Dr Stevenson treated at Newstan, Peter Rhodes, said the chiropractic care he received on-site had provided significant pain relief, helped him avoid many sick days and enabled him to perform better at work.

“I often had lower back and shoulder pain as a result of the repetitive and heavy work I was involved in, and I also had an old work injury that used to flare up occasionally,” Mr Rhodes said.

“If it wasn’t for the chiropractic care I received at the mine site, I would have had to take a lot of time off work and I doubt I would still be working these days.

“I know most of the guys used to try and put up with the pain, but once they had access to the chiropractor they felt much better and were able to get on with the job,” Mr Rhodes said.

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ⁱ WorkCover NSW, Statistical Bulletin 2008/09, Sydney 2010

ⁱⁱ The Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine Policy on preventing work disability, Sydney 2010