

# Complex claims: Mobility breakthroughs and impact on productivity

BY **EDWARD CANAVAN,**  
**AIC, ARM**

*VP, Workers' Compensation Practice  
and Compliance, Sedgwick*

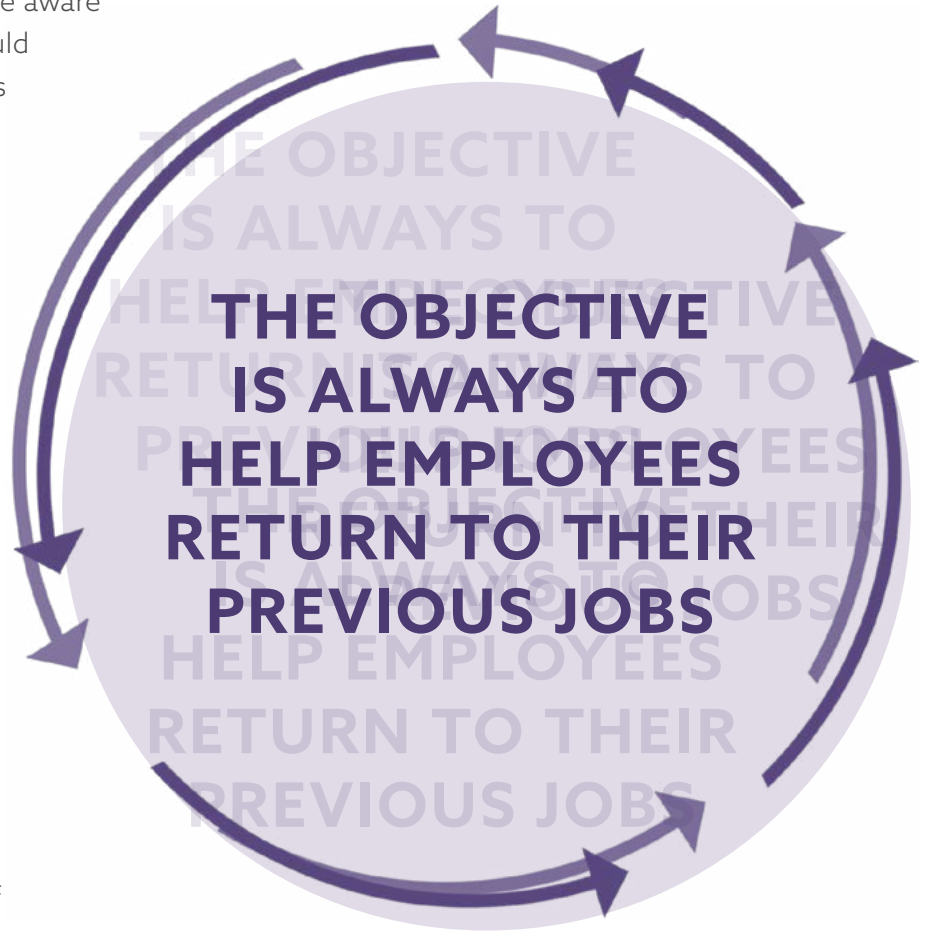
After a traumatic workplace injury, identifying the best physicians to provide medical care for the employee early on is critical to ensuring a good outcome. Another key part of the medical care process is establishing a plan for the physical and occupational therapy needed to help the employee recover. The objective is always to help employees return to their previous jobs or to light duty positions as needed – and to be able to do as much as they did before their injuries. For some patients, this may seem like an unattainable goal, but with the right medical care, they may be able to do more than they imagined.

Finding the employee the appropriate care from providers who understand workers' compensation cases is vital. To help ensure the best results, claims and managed care professionals must work with these doctors and clinical experts to ensure that everything possible is being done to help the employee recover and return to work. Quality providers are aware of the latest treatment options that could impact the employee's recovery such as advancements in physical therapy.

For patients who are unable to walk or those who have severe motor impairments, there is research being done to evaluate medical devices and treatment such as electrical stimulation and training to help improve mobility. One of the medical facilities conducting studies in this area is the Atlanta-based Shepherd Center, a private, not-for-profit hospital specializing in medical treatment, research and rehabilitation for those with spinal cord and brain injuries.

Mitch Fillhaber, Senior Vice President of Corporate Development at Shepherd Center, explained that the technology being studied can have an impact on return to work options, help patients achieve a better quality of life and access more potential jobs than they could have without it. See the adjacent article for more on the valuable research being done at Shepherd Center.

Sedgwick's newly formed complex claims unit specializes in managing workers' compensation claims involving various types of complex and catastrophic injuries such as those affecting the brain and spinal cord. The analysts and advisors in our complex claims unit have 250 years of combined experience and provide expertise and assistance to ensure the cases are progressing. This value-added service is unique to Sedgwick and enhances our efforts to assist the injured employee all while helping to keep the medical management on track.



# Mobility devices can help patients get their lives back

BY **ANDREA BUHL, MSN, RN, FNP-BC**

*SVP, Clinically Integrated Medical Programs, Sedgwick*

For patients with severe injuries, it can take a great deal of therapy and time to be able to recover and return to work. Allowing enough time to assess the patient's potential for recovery is the key. Edelle Field-Fote, PhD, PT, Director of Spinal Cord Injury Research at Shepherd Center, explains that very early after a spinal cord injury, the nervous system goes through a period where it has limited capacity to respond to training, but that changes very quickly.

If the nervous system has a few days or weeks to stabilize, the nervous system has greater capacity to respond, and with access to good care and good rehabilitation, the patient can often attain a significant amount of functional improvement.

At Shepherd Center, studies are underway exploring the capabilities of new mobility devices that would allow patients with spinal cord injuries to walk again. This option is life-changing for many people who would normally be confined to a wheelchair. These

mobility improvements open up many more options for employers to be able to place their employees back in functional jobs. They also give employees the opportunity to feel like they are not so far removed from the workforce they once knew.

There are several mobility devices being introduced such as the Re-Walk, which has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).<sup>1</sup> Some offer the ability to walk over different types of terrain or provide electrical muscle stimulation to assist motorized joints. All of the devices require that the individual be able to use crutches or a walker to maintain their balance.

Dr. Field-Fote notes that in addition to improving mobility, there are also other benefits of walking such as improved respiratory and metabolic function. Being mobile improves pulmonary and urinary function, and decreases the risk of bone fractures. She explains that there are certain areas of the brain associated with memory where new neurons can regenerate. Activities including exercise help stimulate the creation of new neurons, improve the health of existing neurons and facilitate connections between them.

Some of these same concepts apply to motor function; when we do different types of activities as part of physical and occupational therapy, our goal is to help those new connections grow and help compensate for lost functions.

Beyond studies that focus on improving mobility, Shepherd Center experts are also studying approaches that may have the potential to improve hand function. The goal of these studies is to give patients with severe motor impairment in their hands the ability to complete daily activities most of us take for granted like eating, dialing a phone or scratching an itch. Ongoing research and advancements being studied at facilities like Shepherd Center can help patients gain mobility, return to work sooner and improve their overall quality of life.

## REFERENCE

<sup>1</sup>FDA news release. FDA allows marketing of first wearable, motorized device that helps people with certain spinal cord injuries to walk. June 26, 2014. <http://www.fda.gov/newsevents/newsroom/pressannouncements/ucm402970.htm>