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WORKPLACE REPORTER

UPDATED AT 5:22 PM EST

Friday, Nov 12, 2004

Typically, when an employee suffers a serious injury or illness, the employer sends flowers and makes sure the disability benefits are in order.

But the longer the disabled employee remains "out of sight, out of mind," the less likely it is that he or she will ever return to productive employment -- at enormous cost to employers and employees alike, according to new research to be presented at a conference in Vancouver today.

Concerned about the financial and human toll associated with more conventional disability management practices, **Weyerhaeuser Co. Ltd.** of Vancouver has taken a radically different approach, intervening within days of the accident or illness to see about accommodating the employee's return to work.

The absence from the job could be the result of an injury at the workplace or at the hockey rink, or it could be from a heart attack, a stroke or depression.

However, Weyerhaeuser does not differentiate between occupational or non-occupational causes when it comes to easing its disabled employees back to work. And, according to a comprehensive case study to be presented at today's conference, sponsored by the National Institute of Disability Management and Research, this approach is paying off.

Through a combination of better safety procedures and its new approach to disability management, Weyerhaeuser has reduced the number of productive days lost in its Canadian operations by 12,000 over the past three years, Mike Rushby, Weyerhaeuser's vice-president of human resources, said in an interview this week.

"We're down to about 15,000 days a year," Mr. Rushby said. Weyerhaeuser, a global forest products company, has 9,500 employees in Canada.

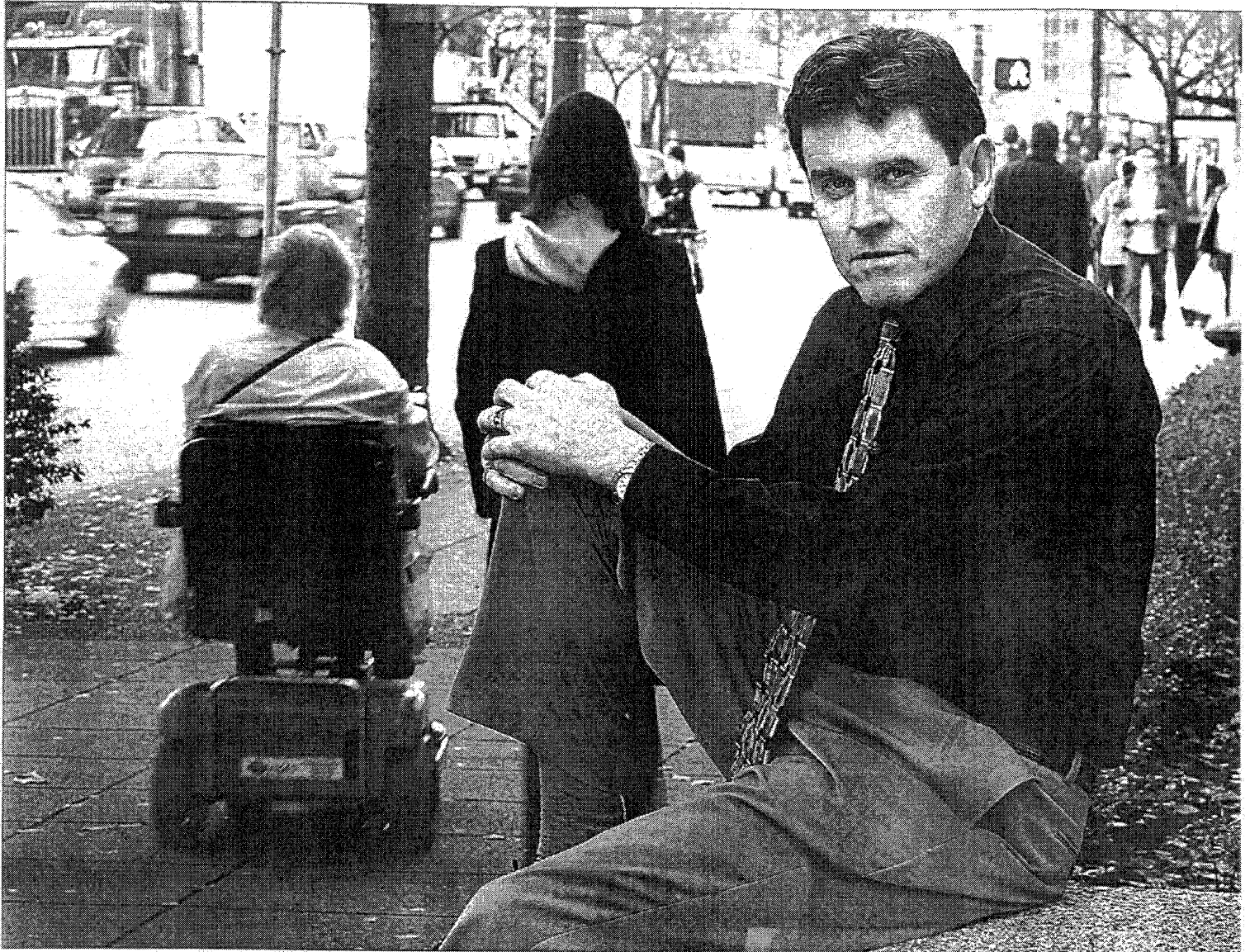
By contrast, in the 2002-03 fiscal year, roughly 187,000 federal government employees took more than 2.2 million days of sick leave, according to statistics recently circulated in Ottawa.

The Weyerhaeuser case study focuses on the company's experience in B.C., where Weyerhaeuser and the Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia tracked the results of the disability management program, which is jointly administered by company and union representatives.

"The data revealed that the co-ordinated return-to-work approach led to a dramatic 47-per-cent reduction in the duration of claims [in 2003] and a 39-per-cent reduction in the costs of claims," according to the case study prepared for the institute. "The impact of the reduction in duration and costs represented a \$4.8-million decrease in workers' compensation claims costs, when compared to the historical average for 2001 and 2002," the report said.

Mr. Rushby, who is also employer co-chairman of the institute, said the study makes a compelling "business case" for more widespread adoption of disability management and return-to-work protocols.

In a study released last year, Toronto-based Watson Wyatt estimated "the annual costs of



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MIKE RUSHBY, WEYERHAEUSER'S VICE-PRESIDENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES

15,000

NUMBER OF PRODUCTIVE DAYS LOST IN WEYERHAEUSER'S CANADIAN OPERATIONS, DOWN FROM 27,000 THREE YEARS AGO

\$4.8-MILLION

THE DECREASE IN WEYERHAEUSER'S WCB CLAIM COSTS IN 2003, WHEN COMPARED WITH THE AVERAGE IN 2001 AND 2002.

\$400,000

LOST WAGES FOR A \$50,000-A-YEAR WORKER WHO BECOMES DISABLED AT AGE 35 AND GOES ON LONG-TERM DISABILITY

employee absence due to illness and disability" at \$16-billion a year.

However, Wolfgang Zimmermann, executive director of the institute, said employers have tended to accept the costs of long-term disability and workers' compensation claims as "the cost of doing business" rather than adopting practices aimed at reducing those claims.

Mr. Rushby said early intervention is the key to a successful return-to-work policy. It saves employers money, he said, and it provides re-employment for people who might not otherwise return to the work force.

"In this economy, employers don't hire disabled people. It's a sad state of affairs, but it's a fact."

Mr. Zimmermann said that if an employee earning \$50,000 a year is injured at the age of 35 and goes on long-term disability, he or she will lose an estimated \$400,000 in wages. If the employee goes on social assistance, the loss doubles to \$800,000.

Brian Payne, president of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, and labour co-chairman of the institute, said the Weyerhaeuser model works because it is a "consensus-based approach" that was jointly designed by union and management representatives.

"An effective re-integration and return-to-work program requires the disabled worker to trust the system and they [employees] historically do not trust unilateral systems, which are seen often as ways to get employees off claim rather than figuring out how to get them successfully back into the workplace."

There will still be those who will never recover enough to return to work, Mr. Payne said, but every effort should be made to accommodate those who want to and can.

Weyerhaeuser has created company-wide standards for its disability management and return-to-work process in Canada, Mr. Rushby said. "The shared goal . . . is to return employees who are absent due to occupational and non-occupational illness to meaningful and productive work in a safe and timely manner."

Each Weyerhaeuser work site in Canada has an assigned return-to-work co-ordinator, who is responsible for making early contact with the affected employees, their families, their physicians and their managers to develop a back-to-work accommodation.

"The return-to-work co-ordinator may be a human resources employee (a company representative) or a union member, but someone has to be assigned to this lead role," the case study said. This is a full-time position in some of the larger job sites, Mr. Rushby said.

Company and employee representatives at each job site are also required to develop a job bank of "transitional positions" for returning employees who have been given medical clearance by their doctors.

The conference is expected to draw employer representatives, union leaders and workers' compensation specialists from around the world, as well as a senior official from the federal Ministry of Labour. The National Institute of Disability Management and Research was established 10 years ago by a consortium of business, labour, government, insurance and rehabilitation representatives committed to promoting best practices in disability management, Mr. Zimmermann said.

Ramona Steacy, a principal with Toronto-based human resources consulting firm Morneau Sobeco, said in an interview this week that interest in disability management is growing as claims costs rise, but the application of return-to-work programs is inconsistent across the country.

"There's been a lot of lip-service paid to it in the past by employers, who scramble to develop programs that sit on shelves," said Ms. Steacy, who specializes in absence and disability management. The employers' intentions are good, she said, "but the resources often aren't there to implement the program and keep it current."

It is also essential, as in the Weyerhaeuser model, to enlist employee involvement in developing the strategy from the outset. Otherwise, the employers' motives will be regarded with suspicion and "you are going to have a grievance on every case," she said.

Mr. Payne said that with a consensus-based return-to-work approach, unions and employers reserve the right to disagree in other areas -- and they do -- but, ideally, not at the expense of ill or

injured employees.

At Weyerhaeuser, Mr. Rushby related the case of a sawmill technician who had been told by her physician that, because she suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome, she would never be able to return to work. "She's now back at work full-time. It took 18 months of transition, but she's back," Mr. Rushby said.

Mr. Zimmermann recalled the case of a machine operator who lost an arm in a workplace accident at MacMillan Bloedel, which was acquired by Weyerhaeuser in 1999. This man was able to return to his old job after the company brought in "a rehabilitation engineer and mechanical engineer." The rehabilitation engineer designed a prosthesis, and the mechanical engineer redesigned the machine to accommodate the prosthesis design.

"So it can be done," said Mr. Zimmermann, who spent five years in a wheelchair after breaking his back in a logging accident. He now goes about his business with the aid of canes, and considers himself fortunate that he was back at work in an office job with his former employer, MacMillan Bloedel, within six months of his accident.

15,000: Number of productive days lost in Weyerhaeuser's Canadian operations, down from 27,000 three years ago

\$4.8-million: The decrease in Weyerhaeuser's WCB claim costs in 2003, when compared with the average in 2001 and 2002.

\$400,000: Lost wages for a \$50,000-a-year worker who becomes disabled at age 35 and goes on long-term disability



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