

WORKERS COMPENSATION, REFERRAL FOR TREATMENT, FOUR-WEEK TIME LIMIT

830. Mrs C.L. EDWARDES to the Minister for Consumer and Employment Protection:

I refer the minister to his proposed change to the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act and his direction statement released in December 2000.

- (1) Is the minister still committed to introducing a mandatory four-week limit for referral of workers for approved rehabilitation and treatment?
- (2) Will the four-week time limit be enshrined in the legislation the minister plans to introduce during the spring session of Parliament?
- (3) Given the significant public benefit that flows from the early referral of injuries to professional rehabilitation - the average referral delay is running at about nine months - by what date will the new four-week time limit be in force?

Mr J.C. KOBELKE replied:

- (1)-(3) The Government seeks to place a four-week limit on injury management, and the Government wishes to carry forward this commitment in legislation currently being drafted. However, it would not be correct to characterise this as a mandatory four weeks. The overwhelming majority of injured workers return to work within four weeks. In a small number of serious cases, people may still be in hospital in that four weeks; therefore, an injury management program cannot be started. The member is correct - it is well accepted - that the earlier people return to work, the better it is for those people. It is not only a cost saving to the system, but also it helps people to return to normal life. The longer people remain off work, the more trauma builds as a result of their not leading a normal life and people become less likely to return effectively to a useful life. The model being considered is that the legislation, which is not yet drafted, will create a four-week window, at which stage an assessment of cases can be made. It is hoped that people will be picked up at that stage if they need injury management. This will be a small percentage of the overall cases, but detailed management is best provided by regulation. One needs such adaptability to deal with the proposal. Yes, the Government is holding to the proposal that the four-week assessment of all ongoing cases -

Mrs C.L. Edwardes: But you will do that by regulation.

Mr J.C. KOBELKE: The drafting is not concluded, so I cannot provide a definitive answer. The current form of suggested drafting is that the legislation provide that cases be picked up within four weeks. Rather than making it mandatory, regulations will fine-tune the system to ensure that as many people as possible are brought into the injury management program, if that is the most appropriate approach for those people. Four weeks should be the time that the judgment be made for most cases.