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## The Human Factors & Ergonomics Society of Australia (HFESA)

### Submission to the Queensland Legislative Assembly Finance & Administration Committee Inquiry into the operation of the Queensland Workers Compensation Scheme

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The Queensland Government has established an inquiry into the operation of the Queensland Workers Compensation Scheme, and has called for submissions in accordance with the terms of reference. The Human Factors & Ergonomics Society (HFESA) presents the following submission.

#### 1. HFESA Background

Ergonomists and human factors specialists strive to achieve people-centered environments, products and systems resulting in reduced injury and error risk for workers, safer systems of work, and increased productivity.

The HFESA is the peak professional body for ergonomics and human factors in Australia, and is the only **dedicated voice** of ergonomics and human factors in Australia. Its aim is to advance the science of human factors and ergonomics in Australia by:

- promoting research and education in ergonomics and the application of its principles,
- actively representing and lobbying government and industry on issues relevant to ergonomics and human factors in Australia,
- promoting the value of professional ergonomics and human factors to industry, business, government, and the community,
- having quality and accessible professional development and networking programs,
- building mechanisms by which professional standards can be monitored and enhanced, and

- partnering with relevant key professional bodies, educational facilities and industry to promote both research and the quality of application of ergonomics and human factors in Australia.

The HFESA is recognised and valued in Australia as the only inter-disciplinary organisation dedicated to ergonomics and human factors, representing all professionals, across all disciplines of ergonomics and human factors. Membership of the HFESA indicates a member's status as an ethical Professional with a special interest in ergonomics and human factors. The HFESA is an active and thriving Society, with representation from many disciplines. It has Branches in each State and Territory (excluding Tasmania & NT) which report to the National Committee. As a member of the International Ergonomics Association (IEA), the HFESA is a respected part of the international ergonomics and human factors community.

Initially in Australia, education in ergonomics was offered within relevant professional programmes, including engineering, psychology, physiology, architectural science, physiotherapy, occupational health and applied arts and industrial engineering. Today, post-graduate qualifications in ergonomics (at Post Graduate Diploma or Masters Degree level) are offered within several tertiary Institutions. No undergraduate programme totally devoted to the preparation of an ergonomist is currently offered within Australia.

## **2. HFESA Professional Certification**

The high incidence of work related musculoskeletal injuries in the 1980s, together with the Australian Government's move to introduce competency based assessments in all occupations and professions, had implications for the control of the quality of ergonomics practice in Australia and acted as a catalyst to establish a register of professional or certified ergonomists (CPE's). The Professional Affairs Board remains active today in reviewing applications for admission to CPE and reviewing re-certification.

Given the broadened scope of ergonomics today, the core competencies required by any person working within the field, the importance of quality practice, the definition and accreditation of the professional ergonomist, and the specification of optimal educational requirements for an ergonomist have been critical issues managed by the HFESA.

## **3. Executive Summary**

In making this submission, the HFESA seeks to add its views to the Inquiry's consideration of the following elements of its Terms of Reference:

- The performance of the Scheme in meeting its objectives under Section 5 of the Act;
- How the Queensland workers' compensation scheme compares to the scheme arrangements in other Australia jurisdictions;
- WorkCover's current and future financial position and its impact on the Queensland economy, the State's competitiveness and employment growth



#### **4. Issues**

- 4.1 The current Qld WorkCover Scheme and regulator Q-Comp, have no provision for, or means by which an 'ergonomist or human factors specialist' might be engaged to provide specialist advice to employers associated with work-related injuries and Claims in order to provide:
- Specific workplace assessment services and recommendations to ensure injured workers are not placed at ongoing risk when returning to work due to no improvements in work circumstances, environment or systems,
  - Specific ergonomic advice to minimise future injury or harm to injured employees or any other employees of the business,
  - Pro-active ergonomic risk assessment advice and interventions (specific tools, techniques, programs and training) to reduce the number and severity of work-related injuries, whilst maintaining or improving productivity, and
  - Ergonomic interventions specific to the physical work environment and work systems where multiple claims have occurred with the one employer and it is reasonably foreseeable and predicted that without intervention, that this trend will continue.
- 4.2 The current WorkCover Scheme in Queensland currently makes provision for the payment of Allied Health Services ie. Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Exercise Physiology etc associated with a Claim once an injury has occurred, however makes no provision for Ergonomists or Human Factors specialists to provide professional preventative advice and interventions, aimed at ensuring the causes of the injury(s) and Claims have been minimised and/or eliminated, and that aggravation to the injured worker is avoided and future claims are prevented.
- 4.3 The current WorkCover Queensland scheme is 'reactive' in focus responding to Injury Claims once they have occurred without recognising the valuable 'proactive' role and contribution an ergonomist can play in preventing future injuries.

#### **5. Inquiry Terms of Reference**

- 5.1 The performance of the scheme in meeting its objectives under Section 5 of the Act.
- 5.1.1 Section 5 (1) (b) of the Act states as a key objective that the Workers' Compensation Scheme will "encourage improved health and safety performance by employers". The current Qld WorkCover Scheme and regulator Q-Comp, have no provision for or means by which an 'ergonomist or human factors specialist' might be engaged to provide the integral specialist advice to employers to meet this obligation.
- 5.1.2 Section 5 (4) (c) of the Act states that it is intended that the scheme should "provide for the protection of employers' interests in relation to claims for damages for workers' injuries". Certified members of the HFESA have the skill-set and expertise to provide the essential services to meet this obligation, however are not currently referred to or utilised by the Qld WorkCover scheme.
- 5.2 How the Queensland workers' compensation scheme compares to the scheme arrangements in other Australian jurisdictions
- Currently no other Workers Compensation scheme in Australia makes provision for the referral to a Certified Professional Ergonomist through a Table of Costs in order to minimise and/or eliminate claims and costs associated with workplace injuries. The HFESA maintain that significant cost reductions in both human and financial terms,



through reduced premiums, number, length and duration of claims, can be achieved through proactive ergonomic interventions. WorkCover Qld has the opportunity to be a national leader in recognising and making provision for this significant preventative strategy, and improving the overall financial position of the scheme.

#### 5.3 WorkCover's current and future financial position and its impact on the Queensland economy, the State's competitiveness and employment growth

Q-Comp reports that over 100,000 claims per year are lodged in the Queensland workers' compensation scheme. Close to half of all claims lodged in the Queensland workers compensation scheme result in time off work due to injury. A further 36% of claims do not result in time lost but do seek compensation for medical expenses. The recently released Q-Comp financial year 2011/2012 statistical report shows:

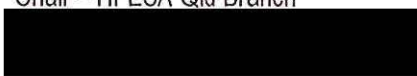
- an increase in the proportion of multiple claims for an injured worker,
- an increase in Statutory payments up by 14% for 2011/12,
- an increase in average work days lost (up from 36 days in 2010/11 to 39 days in 2011/12),
- an increase in average cost of time lost, and
- an increase in weekly compensation payments (after adjusting for inflation - the increase from 2010/11 to 2011/12 is expected to be 9%).

Whilst Allied Health Services and the contribution of return-to-work co-ordinators under the current Qld WorkCover arrangements play a valuable role in claims management and return-to-work/rehabilitation outcomes once an injury has occurred, the HFESA maintains that not until recognition, referral and the active utilisation of the preventative science of ergonomics, will significant reductions and change within these compensation indicators be achieved. A significant shift from a reactive model to incorporate 'proactive principles' is required in order for WorkCover Qld to ensure workers receive optimal quality of care, maximise their return to work outcomes, ensure costs are balanced for employers, and ultimately maintain a financially viable scheme.

### 6. Recommendations

1. That WorkCover Qld and Q-Comp, via their 'Table of Costs', make adequate provision for referral to and payment of 'professional ergonomic services' through the inclusion of a specific payment Code for "Certified Professional Ergonomist".
2. That sufficient sessions and professional rates are allocated by WorkCover Case Managers when referring to and approving the intervention of a Certified Professional Ergonomist, in order to achieve a successful and sustainable outcome with the employer.
3. That WorkCover Case Managers are educated as to the role of a Certified Professional Ergonomist and the value that their expertise will bring in injury and claim minimisation, and safer systems of work.

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