

Chiropractor Serving as Director of Human Resources and Safety

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Author's Note: For this issue, I interviewed Dr. Randy Wheeler of Wichita, Kan., who serves as the full-time HR / safety / training director for a medium-sized, for-profit industry in his community.

Dr. Wheeler, briefly tell us about yourself and how you decided to become a doctor of chiropractic. I had a long-existing familiarity with the profession, as I had been treated by chiropractors since I was a child. I made the decision to become a chiropractor when my uncle was in chiropractic college. I was a veteran of the Air Force and decided to use my G.I. benefits to obtain my training.

Describe how you became interested in occupational health and applied ergonomics. My uncle introduced me to Dr. L. John Faye at dinner after a motion palpation seminar, and I immediately became hooked on biomechanics and functionality. Everything seemed to make perfect sense as Dr. Faye explained his "paradigm shift," as he referred to motion palpation at that time.

Later, when I was in chiropractic school, [Dr. Paul Hooper](#) was an instructor on our campus and I learned more about the health impact of one's occupation and the stress factors involved. As students, we learned how important this understanding was in the evaluation and clinical management of patients. Once in practice, I continued to be drawn to helping workers in the workplace.

I understand you are currently serving as the human resources and safety director for one of the firms in your community. Please describe to our readers how you attained this position and the duties and responsibilities involved. As you have always emphasized, it was a grassroots process. One of my patients worked for a safety consulting company and was looking for someone to help them develop a back safety program. He asked me if I provided classes in preventing spine injuries, and when I told him I did, he asked me if I would be interested in helping him. We went to the workplace, and after obtaining their permission, took pictures of the workers and their work stations. Through this assessment process, we were able to develop the class.

At that time, which is now almost 13 years ago, I had shared with this patient that I was very frustrated with the insurance industry, to the point that I was considering changing over to a cash practice. A few months later, he asked me if I might be interested in a full-time position as a safety / training director, and introduced me to my present employer, F&H Insulation Sales and Services, Inc.

F&H is a construction firm located in the suburbs of Wichita, Kansas. Our company provides services throughout the Midwest, installing insulation (on piping / boilers / HVAC and low-temperature applications) in petro-chemical and power plants. We also erect scaffolding, apply coatings (paint), asbestos abatement, and lead abatement. Our company employs around 100-150 workers, with fluctuations in the number depending on the current workload and seasons. Our employees are about 90 percent male, assigned to our field operations, and 10 percent female

workers who primarily serve as support staff.

What are the major occupational health services you are providing in your position with the company? All of our employees are involved in our respiratory and hearing conservation program, which I coordinate. We also have employees who perform asbestos abatement, which requires specialized training that I provide. Other employees are commercial interstate vehicle operators and fall under the DOT guidelines, which means that I perform the required [DOT physical examinations](#) and monitor individual health profiles, making sure all our drivers are current and compliant with the federal regulations. I am responsible for overseeing these programs, as well as performing the administrative duties required for workers' compensation injury claims.

In addition, I provide preventive, on-site chiropractic care, which has shown to be highly effective in reducing and preventing work-related neuromusculoskeletal injury claims. Participation in our on-site prevention program is not as high as it might be in a more traditional firm, since, at any given time perhaps 80 percent of our workers are out in the field serving a wide variety of customers in need of our specialized services. As you might expect, the work is very labor intensive and there are a great many physical and hazardous environmental exposure factors, so when employees return to our local facility, they are eager to receive care and are grateful for this company benefit.

What kind of outcomes have you been able to achieve during the time you have served in this capacity? Perhaps the greatest indication of the value of having a full-time chiropractor serving as the human resources coordinator and safety director is that we have been able to achieve and maintain an exceptional safety record. Our workers' compensation insurance modification rate currently ranges between 0.67 and 0.84, which is substantially lower than the national average. This means we can remain extremely competitive in our bidding process for the services we provide other companies.

Since you have so many of your employees working long distances from your corporate facility, I assume you have a challenge in managing the medical care they may need as the result of work-related injury. How do you deal with this? It has been my experience that most occupational health care providers have little or no knowledge of the regulations of OSHA, DOT, or the requirements of the workers' compensation laws in the state they practice in. Because of this, the care provider's decisions often frustrate both the employee and the employer.

An example of this is giving an injured worker several days off instead of inquiring about the employer's return-to-work policy, which in most cases, would safely return the injured employee to work with proper restrictions. Under such circumstances, the employee loses income, the employer loses production, the time off impacts the company's workers' compensation insurance modification rate, and in our unique case, may seriously impact our company's ability to bid on future projects.

Do you feel that providing occupational health and ergonomics services, and assisting businesses and organizations with their health, wellness and safety programs, has a bright future for appropriately trained doctors of chiropractic? Quite honestly, although I am not in private practice, I am puzzled by the lack of properly trained chiropractors in this field. As an employer, I contract with health care providers using this order of priorities:

- Do they provide the expert services I need?
- Can I get my employees seen in a reasonable amount of time?
- Can I talk to the health care provider, and will they listen to my concerns prior to making major decisions?

- Are they impartial to the employee and the employer?

The last item I look at is the price for the services and if the fees are reasonable. I am not looking for a health care provider who is the cheapest, or one who has only the employees' or the employer's needs in mind.

I believe that by taking advantage of the professional training available, careful study of the DOT and [OSHA regulations](#), and a thorough knowledge of the state workers' compensation laws, the chiropractor can become the gold standard for corporate occupational health services. I encourage chiropractors to seriously prepare themselves to serve in the specialty field of occupational health, primarily because it is such a natural fit, considering the vast majority of injuries in the workplace are preventable and neuromusculoskeletal in nature.

Northwestern Health Sciences University offers an occupational health and applied ergonomics diplomate program on DVD. For more information, visit www.nwhealth.edu/conted/seminars/OHdvd.html.

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