

School: Medical Management
Course: Understanding the AMA Guides and Their Use in Workers' Compensation
Faculty: Dr. James Talmage, Assistant Medical Director, Tennessee Bureau of Workers' Compensation

Summary

The course "Understanding the AMA Guides and Their Use in Workers' Compensation," taught by Dr. James Talmage, provides an in-depth exploration of the American Medical Association's (AMA) publications related to the evaluation of permanent impairment, causation, and workability in the context of workers' compensation. The AMA Guides have played a crucial role in standardizing the assessment of impairment and disability for injured workers since the 1950s, offering a systematic approach to ensure fair compensation across various jurisdictions.

Dr. Talmage begins by outlining the historical context and evolution of the AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment, which have undergone six editions since the first guide was published in 1958. The initial aim was to create a standardized system for evaluating the consequences of work injuries, ensuring that individuals with similar injuries received similar compensation, regardless of location. Each of the first five editions of the AMA Guides used a consistent methodology, allowing for easier application across cases. However, the sixth edition, published in 2008, introduced a new methodology aligned with the World Health Organization's conceptualization of disability and health. This shift caused challenges for workers' compensation systems, particularly in comparing impairment percentages across different editions.

A key concept discussed is the idea of Maximum Medical Improvement (MMI), a stage where the injured worker's condition has stabilized and is unlikely to improve further with treatment. According to the AMA, impairment ratings are assigned only once a worker reaches MMI, reflecting the impact on Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) rather than specific job requirements. The course emphasizes the distinction between impairment and disability: while physicians assess impairment, disability is a broader concept influenced by various factors, including the individual's education, work experience, and the availability of suitable employment. The AMA Guides stress that the relationship between impairment and disability is complex, and thus, the determination of disability often requires a legal judgment.

Dr. Talmage also discusses the AMA's Guide to the Evaluation of Disease and Injury Causation, which provides a six-step process for evaluating causation in workers' compensation cases. This guide assists physicians in determining whether a worker's injury or illness is work-related, considering factors like epidemiologic evidence, the

dose of exposure, and non-work-related risk factors. The course explains that medical causation, which is based on scientific studies, differs from legal causation, which is determined by judges based on case law and specific jurisdictional definitions.

The third publication covered in the course is the AMA's guide on assessing workability. It introduces concepts of risk, capacity, and tolerance, exploring how physicians design work restrictions and assess an injured worker's ability to return to work. The course highlights the challenges in this assessment, noting that many physicians rely on subjective judgment or anecdotal experience, leading to inconsistent evaluations of workability.

In conclusion, Dr. Talmage emphasizes the importance of understanding the AMA Guides' role in workers' compensation. He points out the complexities and challenges faced in evaluating impairment, causation, and workability, underscoring the need for a balanced approach that supports both workers' recovery and fair compensation.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the historical development and purpose of the AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment.
2. Learn the differences in methodologies between the first five editions and the sixth edition of the AMA Guides.
3. Identify the key concepts of impairment rating, including Maximum Medical Improvement (MMI) and the distinction between impairment and disability.
4. Explore the AMA Guides' role in legal and compensation systems, including how they interact with causation and workability assessments.
5. Recognize the challenges and limitations associated with using the AMA Guides in different jurisdictions and among various medical professionals.

Primary Takeaways

1. The AMA Guides have evolved over time, with six editions adopting different methodologies, particularly the shift to a new model in the sixth edition that presents challenges in comparing impairment percentages across editions.
2. Impairment ratings should only be assigned after the injured worker has reached Maximum Medical Improvement (MMI), focusing on the impact on Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) rather than the specific job requirements.
3. There is a significant distinction between impairment and disability; while physicians assess impairment, the determination of disability often involves a legal judgment considering the worker's overall capacity for employment.

4. Medical causation and legal causation are distinct concepts, with medical causation based on scientific evidence and legal causation decided by judges based on legal definitions and case law.
5. Physicians' assessments of workability involve complex considerations of risk, capacity, and tolerance, often leading to varied opinions on a worker's ability to return to work.

Course Outline

- 1) Introduction to the AMA Guides
 - a) Historical development and editions of the AMA Guides
 - b) Purpose and use in assessing injured workers
 - c) Overview of the AMA's publications on impairment, causation, and workability
- 2) AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment
 - a) Early editions (1958-2000) and methodology
 - b) The sixth edition's new methodology and its implications
 - c) Assigning impairment ratings at Maximum Medical Improvement (MMI)
 - d) Differentiating impairment from disability
- 3) Use of the AMA Guides in Legal and Compensation Systems
 - a) Role in workers' compensation cases
 - b) Interaction with legal processes and judges
 - c) Dispute resolution and variations across jurisdictions
 - d) Influence on indemnity payments and awards
- 4) Understanding Impairment Ratings
 - a) Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and their impact on impairment percentages
 - b) Conversion of impairment ratings for different body parts
 - c) Challenges in consistency and fairness of impairment ratings among physicians
- 5) Medical and Legal Causation
 - a) Distinction between medical and legal causation
 - b) Evaluating causation in workers' compensation cases
 - c) The six-step process for causation analysis
 - d) Jurisdictional differences and standards for work-relatedness
- 6) Assessing Workability and Return to Work
 - a) Concepts of risk, capacity, and tolerance in workability
 - b) Methods used by physicians to assess workability

- c) The role of functional capacity evaluations and tolerance in return-to-work decisions
 - d) Challenges in assessing workability and ensuring consistency among medical professionals
- 7) Conclusion
- a) Summary of key concepts and challenges in using the AMA Guides
 - b) Emphasis on the importance of understanding impairment, causation, and workability in workers' compensation
 - c) The ongoing evolution of the AMA Guides and their impact on workers' recovery and compensation.

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