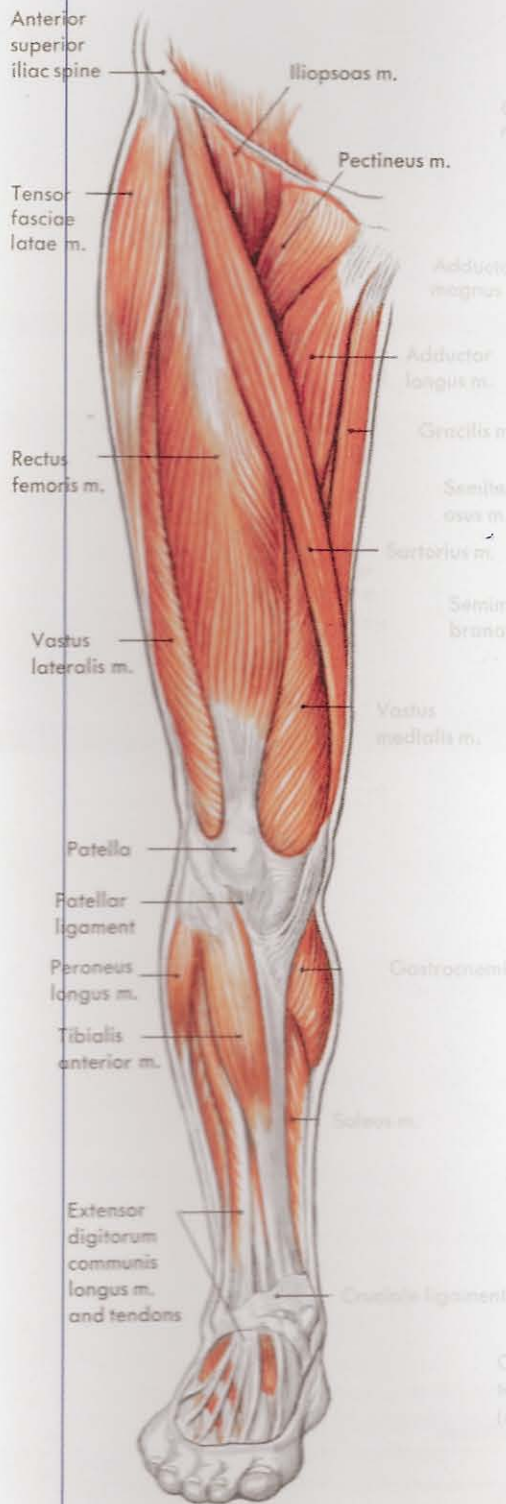


## Onsite Physiotherapy A blinding flash of the obvious



AaE Vic/Tas has introduced an onsite physiotherapy service at its Tullamarine terminal, with sessions on Tuesday evenings between 6.00pm and 9.00pm and on Thursday afternoons between 2.00pm and 5.00pm.

The service, which is staffed by physiotherapists from the young Port Melbourne practice, BodyCare Physiotherapy, has been well received, with users' comments encouraging project drivers State Manager Vic/Tas, Richard Conron, Vic/Tas OH&S Manager, Linda Del Medico and Vic/Tas Operations Manager, Mark Canavan.

"Back injuries and other sprains and strains account for more than half of all ComCare claims, and are the cause of around 80% of lost time injuries in our business," Richard Conron said. "Onsite physiotherapy will help us get on top of these injuries quickly, with initial treatment designed to relieve the discomfort, prevent further damage to the affected area, and assist the body to recover from the injury."

But there is more to onsite physiotherapy than this. "Being onsite - being able to see all of the jobs that are done and watch the team in action - lets the physiotherapist see why particular injuries are happening. That understanding is critical to our ability to eliminate sprains and strains from our workplaces.

"Making that happen will involve many things including warm up exercises and stretches, equipment-related recommendations, and changes to work methods. And where team members have a history of back or other problems, we now have a physiotherapist onsite to provide individual advice which will help them avoid repeat injuries," Richard said.

BodyCare Physiotherapist, Dean Mohr, says that onsite physiotherapy has dramatically reduced the incidence of sprain and strain injuries in other clients' workplaces. In one company, within two years shoulder-related sprains and strains were reduced from "several each month" to only two injuries a year.

Importantly also, AaE team members value the service's 'no blame, no guilt' approach as highly as they do its convenience (located next to the Lunchroom) and its cost benefits.

"The emphasis is on getting people back to full fitness as quickly as possible so that they can do a day's work without discomfort," Richard said. "We don't ask too many questions about whether the sprain or strain happened at work or outside of work. The important thing is that we get on top of the problem quickly. And I think that this 'no blame, no guilt' approach has helped to win acceptance for the service."

Distinctions between work life, home life and social life are meaningless where back, muscle and tendon pain are concerned. Pain is fully portable. And where a weakness has been created, irrespective of where the initial sprain or strain may have happened, support and education is needed if repeat injuries are to be avoided.

And where repeat injuries do occur, it is even more important to be able to step in with the right treatment - and the right advice - at the earliest possible opportunity.

Because this seems such a simple and logical thing to do it may come as a surprise to hear that it is in fact a bold step forward and something highly innovative in Occupational Healthcare in Australia. But the hope is that it will provide a major reduction in the incidence of injuries, in the pain and suffering that they cause, and in the human and financial burdens that they impose on AaE's people and their families, the company and the community at large.

AaE Vic/Tas' move to onsite physiotherapy comes at a time of growing understanding of the importance of early intervention in the management of sprains and strains.

## The great advantage of onsite physiotherapy in the early treatment of sprains and strains is its timeliness – its ability to hit the problem within the first 24 hours or 48 hours after the injury

The great advantage of onsite physiotherapy in the early treatment of sprains and strains is its timeliness – its ability to hit the problem within the first 24 hours or 48 hours after the injury – and the importance of that for treatment outcomes is clearly evident in the VWA (Victorian WorkCare Association) Stakeholder Group's response to the VWA's March 2004 evaluation of its VWA Sprains and Strains Care Model.

The VWA Sprains and Strains Care Model provides a treatment protocol which is 'Centre Based' with workers assessed by, and coordinated through, WorkCare and sent for treatment to WorkCare-approved providers across the State. This Model also has a remuneration system that, according to the VWA Stakeholder Group, effectively excludes clinicians other than medical practitioners from case conferences, even where these clinicians may be the primary treating practitioners.

The VWA Stakeholder Group comprises the Victorian Council of Occupational Health Providers, the Australian Physiotherapists Association Vic Branch, the Australian Association of Occupational Therapists – Vic Inc, the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Chiropractors' Association of Australia (Victoria) Ltd.

VWA's March 2004 evaluation of the pilot of its VWA Sprains and Strains Care Model confirmed that early intervention improves rehabilitation outcomes but, in the opinion of the VWA Stakeholder Group, failed to establish a convincing case for centre-based rehabilitation.

In its April 2004 response the VWA Stakeholder Group noted, amongst its criticisms of the Model, that "Centre Based service provision is a medical model which removes the critical focus of successful return to work – workplace rehabilitation".

It concluded also that although "the concept of providing the 'right treatment at the right time' is an appropriate objective ... in practice, the Model may deliver intervention that is 'timely' in relation to scheme constraints but not 'early' in relation to best

practice clinical care (0 to 6 weeks post injury)".

Getting in early with the right treatment is the key. And this is where AaE is looking to onsite physiotherapy to open the door to a future in which workplace sprains and strains at its depots and terminals across the nation can be kept down to no more than 'a few a year'. The hope for sprain and strain casualties is that onsite physiotherapy will lead the way to a better approach to acute treatment, to better short-term follow up and to more effective prevention of recurrent problems.

For injured workers, that would mean providing the right treatment immediately after the injury, with onsite follow-up support to get them back to full strength as quickly as possible. Beyond this, it would also mean following through with a personalised prevention plan that will, as far as is humanly possible, keep them free from recurrent injuries.

But there is more to the problem than this. Every team of people involved in manual handling operations – whether they be footballers, process workers, shearers or porters – will include people with varying degrees of exposure to musculoskeletal problems. There will be people who remain injury free. There will be people with a history of sprains and strains who are not troubled by repeat injuries. There will be those who are more prone to recurrent problems, and those who are in varying stages of recovery from a previous injury.

Their needs are not the same and clearly, in this real world setting, any hope that AaE has of creating sprain and strain free workplaces will only be realised if the 'right' corrective and preventative action is taken for each group of people at all of its work sites not only 'at the right time' but also 'every time' and 'all the time'.

Onsite physiotherapy has an important role to play in this, and it will be interesting to see whether the Vic/Tas team can point the way forward in this area for the rest of the company.

Commenting on the improvements that he, Richard, Linda and Mark are striving for, BodyCare Principle, Dean Mohr, said "For one thing we are aiming for a healthier workforce. People who are far better educated in managing any musculoskeletal problems that might occur. People who know how to avoid these types of injuries and who know how to deal with these situations if they arise".

Dean stresses that quantum reductions in injury profiles do not happen overnight or without effort, but with his practice's strong emerging track record, his commitment to the challenge, and his ability to win the confidence of the team, hopes are high for a successful outcome from this important initiative.

