

Chicken farm slices LTI, premium rates



A Victorian chicken farm has dramatically reduced workers' compensation claims and premiums by introducing an on-site movement-based therapy known as active release technique (ART).

GB is the workers' compensation Agent for family owned and operated Hazeldene's Chicken Farm, which supplies supermarket chains, wholesalers and distributors. It has a farm and processing facility at Lockwood, 15km from Bendigo, in regional Victoria, additional breeding and broiler farms, and a hatchery at East Bendigo. There are about 500 employees, of whom 300 are based at Lockwood.

Sandra Whitlock, Workplace Injury Manager, said Hazeldene's had high premiums and claim levels because much of the processing was repetitive work, generating muscle strains and sprains. Management was seeking ways to reduce claims and heard, through an industrial relations consultant, of work James Murray, Managing Director of the Soft Tissue Centre (STC), was doing at abattoirs.

Hazeldene's Managing Director John Hazeldene, General Manager, Production, Gerry Rickard, and Dr Murray "had a chat" and launched a trial in 2005. Ms Whitlock said STC consultants, who are qualified osteopaths, chiropractors and physiotherapists who have received an additional two years ART training, were

onsite three days a week. "Employees are encouraged to report any 'niggle' or discomfort to their supervisor, which begins the early-intervention process," Ms Whitlock said. ART treatment meant potential problems were stemmed early, reducing lost time from injuries. Employees were usually able to remain on current duties during treatment or could move to modified duties.

"It's a win-win for employees and the company. It keeps production flowing and is a morale booster for staff," she said

Over five years, the combined input into injury management by Hazeldene's, STC and GB has seen the company's premium rate drop from 14% to 4% of payroll, representing "astronomical" savings for the company.

When STC came on board, there were 28 current workers' compensation claims. Today there are only five, but Ms Whitlock still aims to reduce that figure.

ART was developed in Canada, where Dr Murray trained. He said ART was simple, but hard to do properly. It involved shortening the affected soft-tissue structure then gently pulling it free. Acute strains and sprains began with a

gradual onset and "weird" symptoms, like an inability to loosen up. ART aimed to understand the true reason for pain and treat "the mechanism behind the diagnosis".

Dr Murray said ART "gets to the source of the problem, breaking down adhesions and scar tissues. This restores joints and tissues to full function and mobility faster. For example, in 90% of cases, STC consultants can resolve carpal tunnel syndrome three times faster than the average for other treatment alternatives".

Dr Murray said ART averaged 2.81 visits to resolve occupational injuries, compared with 12-18 visits for traditional treatments. STC used 18 treatment styles, including ART.

Regular, early intervention meant problems did not escalate. When STC began working with an organisation, injuries were generally more serious, but the "bar is lowered" as potential injuries were identified earlier, Dr Murray said.

At Hazeldene's, injuries included postural pain from standing at work stations, sore shoulders and backs, and elbow, wrist and hand injuries.

STC works only with employer clients, focusing on on-site treatment in industries with high soft tissue injury levels, for example, food and manufacturing. STC also offers risk management, employee training and benchmarking.