

Permanent Medical Impairment Issues Identification Paper



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PURPOSE

Each year approximately 1,750 injured workers complete a Permanent Medical Impairment (PMI) assessment due to a workplace injury. The Permanent Impairment (PI) rating and PMI assessment processes and policies within the WCB are integral to assessing workers' injuries and claims, toward a successful return to work.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and explore issues and discuss proposed policy changes to the PMI process with system stakeholders. The goal of this policy review is to improve the assessment system for workers, improve efficiency, and improve the processing time for awarding permanent impairment benefits. As part of this, the PMI section of the policy manual may also be condensed and re-organized for clarity and ease of use.

The WCB will undertake a two-stage consultation process. This paper provides stakeholders with an understanding of the current processes and other relevant background information related to PMI assessments.

Stage 1 Consultation

In the first stage of this consultation, the WCB is inviting a small group of stakeholders to meet and provide feedback on the types of issues the WCB should consider as it moves forward with review of PMI policies.

Stage 2 Consultation

Considering input from stakeholders in Stage 1, the WCB will revise the PMI policies and prepare another background paper that includes the draft policies, for distribution. The paper and draft policies will be posted to the WCB's website. All stakeholders will be invited to provide feedback on the draft revised policies before they are submitted to the WCB Board of Directors for approval.

BACKGROUND

Currently, **Subsection 3.3 – Permanent Medical Impairment Benefit** of the *WCB Nova Scotia Policy Manual* governs the calculation of a Permanent Impairment Benefit (PIB), which is based on a PI rating, determined through a PMI assessment that is completed by a Board Medical Advisor. For injuries prior to January 1, 2000, PI ratings are

assessed using the *Guidelines for Assessment of Permanent Medical Impairment*. Injuries arising on or after January 1, 2000 are assessed using the *American Medical Association's Determining Permanent Impairment Ratings using the Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment – 4th Edition* (commonly known as the AMA Guides – 4th Edition).



ISSUES

Two issues have been identified with the current policy that impact the ability to effectively deliver services to injured workers:

1. Policy 3.3.2R3 currently requires a WCB Medical Advisor to carry out PMI assessments. This limits the number of individuals who can perform PMI assessments and has contributed to a backlog.
2. Training or certification programs on the 4th edition of the AMA guidelines are no longer available. The requirement to use an outdated version of the AMA guides to assess PMIs means the WCB is training and certifying new Medical Advisors in the newest version of the AMA guidelines, which they utilize for many of their job duties. But for PMI assessments, the Medical Advisors must re-learn and apply the AMA 4th edition.

Including Non-Physician Health Care Providers in the PMI Assessment Process

WCB Policy currently specifies that a physician (Policy 3.3.2R3 for injuries before Jan 1 2000) or a WCB Medical Advisor (Policy 3.3.4R1 for injuries on or after Jan 1 2000) must carry out PMI assessments.

There is no formal definition for Medical Advisor in WCB law or policy, but the WCB Policy Manual glossary notes that the accepted interpretation or use of Medical Advisor/Officer within WCB is “a physician employed by the Board to provide advice and opinions with respect to medical issues arising in connection with claims for compensation benefits.”

There are a significant number of Nova Scotian workers waiting for a PMI assessment. Until they have the assessment and receive a PMI rating, their eligibility for benefits cannot be determined. The WCB completes about 1,750 PMI assessments annually.

Only allowing physicians to perform PMI assessments reduces the number of health care providers available to complete the assessments. Rather than only allowing Board Medical Advisors (physicians) to complete PMI assessments, the proposal would allow qualified health care providers (physiotherapists, chiropractors, etc.) to complete the physical exam and draft the templated PMI assessment report. Then, a Board Medical Advisor (physician) would review the work of the health care provider, determine the PI rating, and finalize the report, based on their knowledge and application of the AMA Guidelines.

THERE ARE SEVERAL ADVANTAGES TO EXPANDING THE LIST OF QUALIFIED HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS WHO CAN ASSIST WITH PMIS

- It would provide more timely assessments for workers
- Workers would be able to get an assessment in their local community, from a local health care provider
- It would make better use of Board Medical Advisor time, expertise, and CIME credentials by reducing Medical Advisors' time spent on physical assessments
- It would leverage the significant physical assessment knowledge and skills of physiotherapists and chiropractors
- It would reduce the booking workload for WCB Health Services employees, as initial assessment appointments would be booked directly with health care providers
- It would increase the WCB's capacity to complete more PMI assessments



PILOT PROJECT RESULTS

In late November 2020, a pilot project was launched to test this approach and determine if a broader change would work. Medical PI Examiners (physicians) were paired with physiotherapists in both Halifax and Sydney, and they examined shoulder and knee claims to determine the PI ratings.

The pilot project confirmed that physiotherapists have the knowledge and experience to complete the initial exams for workers with musculoskeletal injuries. The PI Examiners were able to use the findings from the physiotherapists to successfully complete and finalize the PMI report.

Updating to the Most Current Version of the AMA Guides

Currently, the 4th edition of the of the *American Medical Association Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment* (AMA Guide) is used by the WCB to calculate the PI rating for workers with injuries on or after Jan 1, 2000. This is outlined in the *Guidelines for the Assessment of Permanent Medical Impairment* outlined in Policy 3.3.4R1. The 4th edition was released in 1993; the 5th edition was released in 2000; and the 6th edition was released in 2007.

“ The pilot project confirmed that physiotherapists have the knowledge and experience to complete the initial exams for workers with musculoskeletal injuries. ”

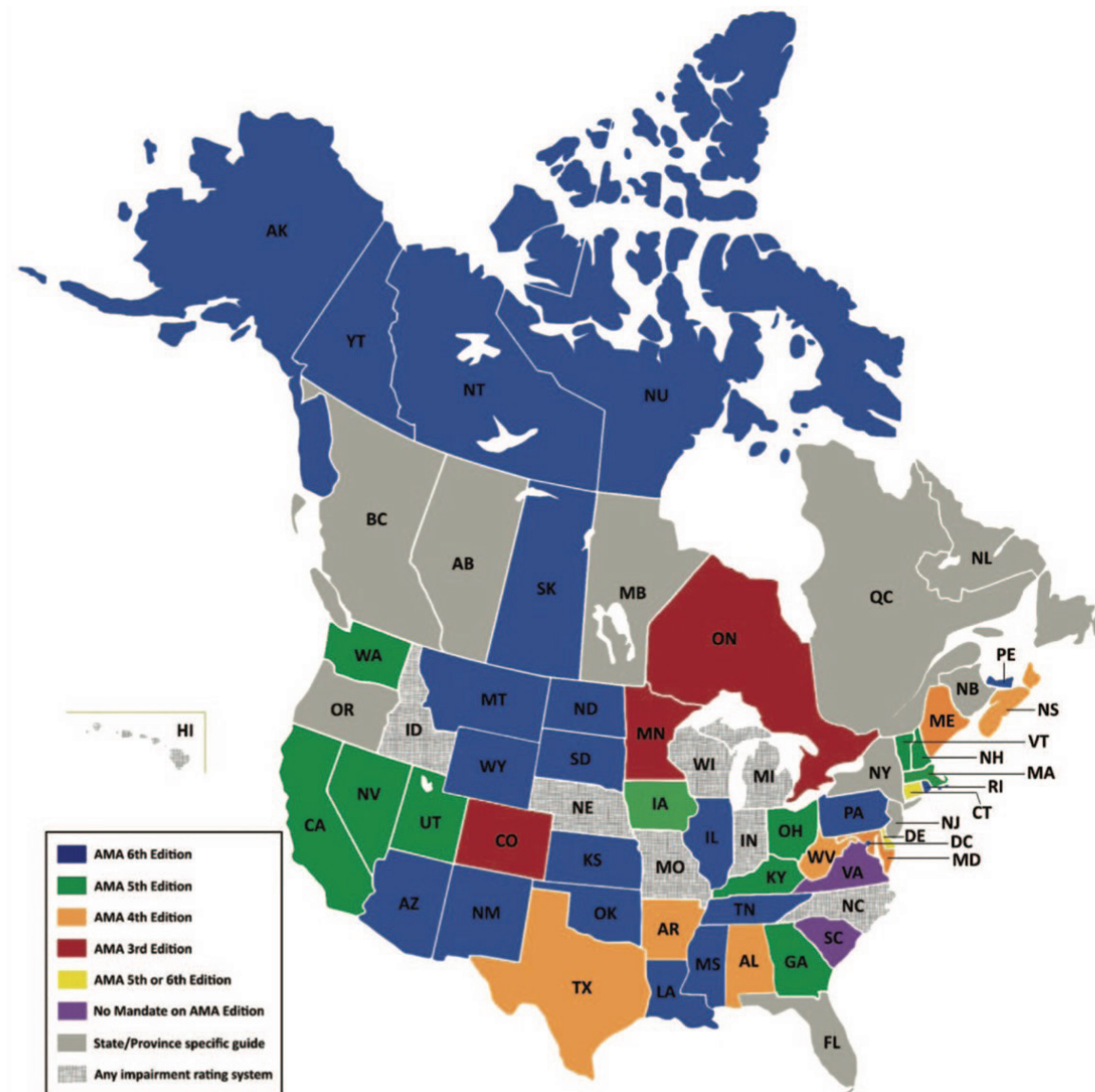
ADOPTING THE MOST CURRENT 6TH EDITION OF THE AMA GUIDE WOULD OFFER SIGNIFICANT ADVANTAGES

- Training and certification for the 4th edition is no longer available, making it increasingly difficult to onboard and train new Board Medical Advisors
- The 6th edition can be paired with software that automatically calculates the PI percentage, allowing for faster processing and reducing calculation errors
- The 6th edition is based on recent science and evidence related to permanent impairment and aligns with the WCB's goal to utilize the most current evidence-based research in our work



AMA MAP

This map shows the use of the AMA Guides by Workers' Compensation Boards across North America (2018). Nova Scotia would be among the last jurisdictions to adopt the more recent version of the AMA Guide. New Brunswick began to adopt the 6th edition of the AMA Guides in 2022.



PROVIDING YOUR COMMENTS

We would like to invite you to participate in a working group discussion to explore issues regarding Permanent Medical Impairment assessment processes. **In particular, we encourage you to consider whether there are any additional issues you would like to see addressed as the WCB considers revising the PMI and related policies.**

To confirm your participation, or if you have any questions prior to the Working Group meeting (date and location to be determined) please contact:

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF PI POLICIES

Subsection 3.3 – Permanent Impairment Benefit (PIB), Policy Number:

- 3.3.1R1 - Calculation of Permanent Impairment Benefit (PIB)
- 3.3.2R3 - Permanent Impairment Rating Schedule
- 3.3.3R1 - Review of Permanent Impairment Benefit
- 3.3.4R1 - Determining Permanent Medical Impairment Ratings using the Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment (AMA Guides – 4th edition) – Injuries on or after January 1, 2000
- 3.3.5R1 - Eligibility Criteria and Compensation related to chronic pain

Click [Policy Manual](#) for full Policy details.