

WEST VIRGINIA CODE: §23-4-7a

§23-4-7a. Monitoring of injury claims; legislative findings; review of medical evidence; recommendation of authorized treating physician; independent medical evaluations; temporary total disability benefits and the termination thereof; mandatory action; additional authority; suspension of benefits.

(a) The Legislature hereby finds and declares that injured claimants should receive the type of treatment needed as promptly as possible; that overpayments of benefits with the resultant hardship created by the requirement of repayment should be minimized; and that to achieve these two objectives it is essential that the commission establish and operate a systematic program for the monitoring of injury claims where the disability continues longer than might ordinarily be expected.

(b) In view of the foregoing findings, the commission, in consultation with the health care advisory panel, shall establish guidelines as to the anticipated period of disability for the various types of injuries. Each injury claim in which temporary total disability continues beyond the anticipated period of disability established for the injury involved shall be reviewed by the commission. If satisfied, after reviewing the medical evidence, that the claimant would not benefit by an independent medical evaluation, the commission shall mark the claim file accordingly and shall diary the claim file as to the next date for required review which shall not exceed sixty days. If the commission concludes that the claimant might benefit by an independent medical evaluation, the commission shall proceed as specified in subsections (d) and (e) of this section.

(c) When the authorized treating physician concludes that the claimant has either reached his or her maximum degree of improvement or is ready for disability evaluation, or when the claimant has returned to work, the authorized treating physician may recommend a permanent partial disability award for residual impairment relating to and resulting from the compensable injury, and the following provisions govern and control:

(1) If the authorized treating physician recommends a permanent partial disability award of fifteen percent or less, the commission shall enter an award of permanent partial disability benefits based upon the recommendation and all other available information. The claimant's entitlement to temporary total disability benefits ceases upon the entry of the award unless previously terminated under the provisions of subsection (e) of this section.

(2) If, however, the authorized treating physician recommends a permanent partial disability award in excess of fifteen percent, or recommends a permanent total disability award, the claimant's entitlement to temporary total disability benefits ceases upon the receipt by the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, of the medical report. The commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, shall refer the claimant to a physician or physicians of its selection for independent evaluation

prior to the entry of a permanent disability award: Provided, That unless the claimant has returned to work, the claimant shall thereupon receive benefits which shall be at the permanent partial disability rate as provided in subdivision (e), section six of this article until the entry of a permanent disability award or until the claimant returns to work. The amount of benefits paid prior to the receipt of the independent evaluation report shall be considered and determined to be payment of the permanent disability award granted, if any. In the event that benefits actually paid exceed the amount granted by the permanent partial disability award, the claimant is entitled to no further benefits by the award and the excess paid shall be an overpayment. For all awards made or nonawarded partial benefits paid the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, may only recover the amount of overpaid benefits or expenses by withholding, in whole or in part, future disability benefits payable to the individual in the same or other claims and credit the amount against the overpayment until it is repaid in full.

(d) When the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, concludes that an independent medical evaluation is indicated, or that a claimant may be ready for disability evaluation in accordance with other provisions of this chapter, the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, shall refer the claimant to a physician or physicians of its selection for examination and evaluation. If the physician or physicians selected recommend continued, additional or different treatment, the recommendation shall be relayed to the claimant and the claimant's treating physician and the recommended treatment may be authorized by the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable.

(e) Notwithstanding any provision in subsection (c) of this section, the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, shall enter a notice suspending the payment of temporary total disability benefits but providing a reasonable period of time during which the claimant may submit evidence justifying the continued payment of temporary total disability benefits when:

(1) The physician or physicians selected by the commission conclude that the claimant has reached his or her maximum degree of improvement;

(2) When the authorized treating physician advises the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, that the claimant has reached his or her maximum degree of improvement or that he or she is ready for disability evaluation and when the authorized treating physician has not made any recommendation with respect to a permanent disability award as provided in subsection (c) of this section;

(3) When other evidence submitted to the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, justifies a finding that the claimant has reached his or her maximum degree of improvement; or

(4) When other evidence submitted or otherwise obtained justifies a finding that the claimant has engaged or is engaging in abuse, including, but not limited to, physical activities inconsistent with his or her compensable workers' compensation injury.

In all cases, a finding by the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, that the claimant has reached his or her maximum degree of improvement terminates the claimant's entitlement to temporary total disability benefits regardless of whether the claimant has been released to return to work. Under no circumstances shall a claimant be entitled to receive temporary total disability benefits either beyond the date the claimant is released to return to work or beyond the date he or she actually returns to work.

In the event that the medical or other evidence indicates that claimant has a permanent disability, unless he or she has returned to work, the claimant shall thereupon receive benefits which shall be at the permanent partial disability rate as provided in subdivision (e), section six of this article until entry of a permanent disability award, pursuant to an evaluation by a physician or physicians selected by the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, or until the claimant returns to work. The amount of benefits shall be considered and determined to be payment of the permanent disability award granted, if any. In the event that benefits actually paid exceed the amount granted under the permanent disability award, the claimant is entitled to no further benefits by the order.

(f) Notwithstanding the anticipated period of disability established pursuant to the provisions of subsection (b) of this section, whenever in any claim temporary total disability continues longer than one hundred twenty days from the date of injury (or from the date of the last preceding examination and evaluation pursuant to the provisions of this subsection or pursuant to the directions of the commission under other provisions of this chapter), the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, shall refer the claimant to a physician or physicians of the commission's selection for examination and evaluation in accordance with the provisions of subsection (d) of this section and the provisions of subsection (e) of this section are fully applicable: Provided, That the requirement of mandatory examinations and evaluations pursuant to the provisions of this subsection shall not apply to any claimant who sustained a brain stem or spinal cord injury with resultant paralysis or an injury which resulted in an amputation necessitating a prosthetic appliance.

(g) The provisions of this section are in addition to and in no way in derogation of the power and authority vested in the commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, by other provisions of this chapter or vested in the employer to have a claimant examined by a physician or physicians of the employer's selection and at the employer's expense, or vested in the claimant or employer to file a protest, under other provisions of this chapter.

(h) All evaluations and examinations performed by physicians shall be performed in

accordance with the protocols and procedures established by the health care advisory panel pursuant to section three-b of this article: Provided, That the physician may exceed these protocols when additional evaluation is medically necessary.

(i) The commission, successor to the commission, other private carrier or self-insured employer, whichever is applicable, may suspend benefits being paid to a claimant if the claimant refuses, without good cause, to undergo the examinations or needed treatments provided for in this section until the claimant submits to the examination or needed treatments. The executive director shall propose rules for approval by the commission to implement the provisions of this subsection.