

**Symposium on the Consequences of Work Injury**

**Friday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009**

**Opening speech by Jill Hutcheon, President & CEO, WSIB**

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**Good morning, and thank you for inviting me here today.**

**I've met and worked with some of you over the years in my time as President and CEO of the WSIB.**

**And, as a representative of the WSIB, I'm very much aware that when I walk into a room, there are some people who have negative ideas about us at the WSIB.**

**Some of those negative ideas are based on past experience and those negative experiences can lead to negative thinking.**

**I understand that.**

**But some of you may not have a lot of experience dealing directly with the WSIB.**

**Nonetheless, you may still have negative perceptions about us.**

**Those perceptions may be based on what other people have told you about the WSIB.**

**They may be based on experiences you've had with other government agencies.**

**Or you may think that your beliefs about workers' compensation are "common knowledge" and accepted by most people in your community.**

**We all make value judgements about the people and organizations we deal with every day.**

**We are all guilty of allowing those ideas to influence the way we perceive one another.**

**But when we start believing and perpetuating negative stereotypes, we can hurt people and damage important relationships.**

**And when a worker is hurt on the job negative stereotypes and social stigma can add insult to injury.**

**Almost 95 years ago, a system was put in place in Ontario to ensure that people who were hurt at work could receive fair compensation.**

**It was a system built on idealistic principles.**

Rather than leaving it up to individual employers, the government created a system of collective liability and established a government agency to administer the plan.

It was a no-fault compensation system.

Employers would pay premiums to fund the system.

Workers would give up the right to sue the employer for negligence.

This historic compromise is the basis for our workers' compensation system.

It's important to remember the nature of that compromise.

It wasn't a one-sided agreement.

Both parties made sacrifices and both parties would benefit.

The fact that injured workers have the right to fair compensation is a point that sometimes gets lost as we get caught up in the complexities of our modern system.

They do have the right to fair compensation.

**They also have the right to be treated with dignity and respect by the workers' compensation system/by government/by employers/by health professionals/and by the community at large.**

**Unfortunately, the very people who should be helping injured workers sometimes make it harder for them to move forward with their lives.**

**There is a very real perception to some that injured workers are lazy.**

**That they are scamming the system and could do an honest day's work if they really wanted to.**

**These attitudes have been well documented by RAACWI research.**

**They can be found among health care professionals who suspect workers of malingering.**

**They can be found among employers who don't understand the need for time to heal.**

**They can be found in the community where a neighbour thinks an injured worker must be scamming if they're out in the garden while on compensation.**

**And, unfortunately, you have told us that these attitudes can be found at the WSIB.**

**We've been told that our system perpetuates negative stereotypes by over-emphasizing issues like fraud – when we don't have evidence that there is widespread fraud among injured workers.**

**We've been told that the wording on our forms promotes the idea that people who file a claim may not be legitimately injured.**

**And we've been told that WSIB staff – sometimes unconsciously and without any intention to cause harm – have demonstrated negative attitudes toward injured workers.**

**I would like to take this opportunity to say that the vast majority of WSIB employees especially those who work in front line customer service bring a profound sense of compassion and dedication to everything they do.**

**They are committed professionals who do this work because they want to help injured workers.**

**But that doesn't mean that there isn't room for improvement.**

**And when we're told that the system that was designed to help injured workers is actually causing some of them a great deal of harm, we have to do something about it.**

**So we're taking action to address this issue.**

**This work has already begun.**

**In 2005, we launched a new Code of Business Ethics that directs all WSIB employees to provide prompt, sensitive, and professional service, especially under difficult conditions.**

**In 2006, the WSIB's "Worker Sensitivity Training" program won a national award for training excellence.**

**And the new model for service delivery that we began rolling out last year emphasizes the importance of approaching each worker as an individual with individual needs.**

**This year, we're taking the next step.**

**In partnership with RAACWI, the WSIB has launched a significant new initiative to eliminate stigmatizing language, behaviors, and attitudes from WSIB communications, frontline staff training and service delivery.**

Using research, sharing personal stories, and applying a "stigma lens" to existing forms, publications, messaging and practices, the WSIB will help ensure a positive and respectful environment for injured workers.

We will work to promote more positive attitudes about injured workers by recognizing that not all injuries are visible and that they also have the right to be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace, in health care, and in the community. In partnership with RAACWI, we are developing a framework for action and outreach.

We want every injured worker to see the WSIB as a place that can be relied on for help and security in the event of an injury or illness.

I want to see the WSIB providing injured workers with support as they move forward with their lives.

And I want to share the vision of Sir William Meredith for a system focused on "Justice humanely and speedily rendered."

Changing attitudes and behaviours is never easy.

But I am confident that, with the partnership we've launched with RAACWI, we can make a difference.

**We can make a difference, not just within the WSIB, but in workplaces and communities across Ontario.**

**We can change the way people think about injured workers, eliminating negative stereotypes.**

**And we can even change the way people think about the WSIB.**

**On a personal note I just want to salute RAACWI for the very important work it is undertaking.**

**This community based partnership is leading edge and very innovative. The journey it is on is just as important as the outcomes being sought.**

**We, at WSIB are honored to be working with RAACWI and benefitting from their research results.**