Industrial Injuries of Farm Workers

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• Most industrial employees receive physical examinations to evaluate their physical fitness in relation to their work. The farm worker is neglected in this matter, in that he is hired for almost any type of work without physical evaluation. As a result, his accident rate is high. His efficiency at his work is low. His time loss from work because of sickness and accident is high, and the employer pays a very high rate of insurance for the patient's care and his own legal protection.

Physical fitness cards should be carried by all farm laborers so that they would be put in properly graded jobs.

AGRICULTURAL WORK involves many different kinds of activity, from driving large implements such as harvesters and land levelers to removing the pits from peaches and apricots for drying. It is difficult to find adequate numbers of workers for this seasonal work, more difficult yet to find workers who are physically fit to do it. Hence, persons with poor health, physical handicaps and unstable personalities are often hired—the employer well knowing that the employee is a poor risk for the work involved. Much of the work in agriculture has to be done on large sections of land in a short time. Soil must be worked when it is ready, planting done when soil and season are right, and many crops have to be harvested and shipped within a span of a few days. In such exigencies, almost any worker obtainable must be hired. This presents a problem peculiar to work of this type as compared with the factory, where the employment is steady, there is little turn-over in personnel and each worker is trained to do his particular job efficiently and safely.

By and large a farm worker is hired for almost any kind of work without physical evaluation. His accident rate is high, his efficiency is low, and he loses a good deal of time from work because of sickness and accident. Therefore, the employer has a very high rate to pay for insurance for the worker's care and his own legal protection in case of injury.

Many accidents are attributable to a preexisting disability of the worker. Farm laborers are usually poor, not only in money but in spirit. They work without proper rest and nourishment. Owing to poor living conditions and lack of permanent home, there is insecurity and unrest among the members of the family. Many are ignorant about health principles, and all too many are habitual users of alcoholic beverages, which keeps them poor, lacking in coordination on the job, and undependable.

Some labor contractors provide camps for the workers with facilities for bathing and laundering. Other workers have no provision at all for personal cleanliness. I have seen husband, wife and one or two children sleeping night after night in an automobile and eating from a grocery bag. Some spread a canvas under the trees with only an old mattress for their bedding. Old sheds, pump-houses and barns are likely to be dwelling places for migrant farm workers. Many of the farm laborers are recruited from the slums and "skid rows" of the towns and villages of the agricultural districts. A sizable proportion of the men recruited for farm work are suffering from the effects of the previous evening's drinking and only go to work for an hour or two to get enough money to buy another bottle of wine.

In California the cost of farm labor insurance to protect the employer and care for the employee is high. For agricultural field crop workers it is $4.26 per hundred dollars of wages; for dairy farm workers, $3.21; for poultry workers, $2.82. By contrast, the cost is 9 cents per hundred dollars of salary for office workers. The only work classification with a higher rate is heavy construction work, with a premium of $4.75 per hundred dollars of wage.

Employers in businesses such as food processing, department stores and factories require physical examinations of their employees before employment. This is to determine the physical fitness of persons hired and to make note of preexisting abnormalities. If it is necessary and advisable to have physical examinations for employees where the risk is so small, one would consider that it would be advisable and necessary to have a preemployment physical evaluation of workers where the risk is greater.

It is not uncommon for an agricultural worker who is even slightly injured on the job to complain bitterly and demand compensation for long periods. Often a preexisting condition is blamed on a work-connected injury. For example, the case of a 54-year-old woman, large and moderately obese, who, while picking peaches, fell from a ladder and landed with a picking-bucket under her side. She complained of abdominal pain and on examination was found to

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have a large mass in the pelvis. The examining physician said the pain was owing to a fibroid uterus, not caused by the fall. The patient immediately obtained a lawyer and consulted other physicians who also ascribed the pelvic mass to a fibroid uterus, but said it was possible that the fall might have caused hemorrhage to occur within the fibroid mass. After a hearing before the Industrial Accident Commission, it was decided that the insurance carrier should finance the removal of the tumor to determine if hemorrhage had occurred in it. On operation only a large fibroid uterus was found. It was removed at the expense of the insurance company and further compensation was denied.

Preexisting conditions and disabilities often are contributory causes of accidental injury, as in the case of a 32-year-old wife of a farm worker, who fell from a ladder while picking peaches, landing in a jack-knife position and fracturing the second lumbar vertebra. The patient had had a previous injury to the right knee and the patella had been removed. The joint was very unstable. It was the opinion of the examining physician that the condition of the knee was such that she could not keep her balance on a ladder. Inasmuch as she was hired and working, the insurance company bore the expense of her disability and care.

Many times a malingering worker will claim injury unjustly, usually near the close of the season, and the "disability" will usually continue until work is again available the following season. Evaluation of the patient's subjective complaints in these cases is very important. To do so puts a considerable burden on the attending physician and the arbitration board and insurance carrier. To make record of associated and contributing conditions present in persons injured on the job, and also to have basis for more accurate evaluation of malingering, it would be advisable that physical examinations be carried out on all workers before they are permitted to do any kind of agricultural work. In determining the physical fitness of a worker, complete physical examination should be carried out—not merely the extremities and the easily accessible parts of the body. Careful history taking and examination of the back, including x-ray films, is advisable. Female workers should have preemployment examination for pelvic disorder.

In 1955 there was a total of 15,810 farm injuries reported in California. Injuries to the back made up 21.6 per cent of the total. Of the 3,226 back injuries 2,593 were strains, sprains and dislocations, including injury to intervertebral discs; 67 were fractures; the rest were bruises and contusions.

Most workers with strains and sprains gave a history of having had previous trouble and many are rather well versed in the vocabulary to use in stating their complaints. Patients with real injuries are relatively easy to care for. It is the worker with subjective symptoms who arrives at a physician's office supported by two or three fellow workers and there complains bitterly of pain in the back, who is difficult to cope with. In order to avoid pitfalls, such a patient must be examined in great detail. If no injury is noted and he is told he can go back to work in two or three days, he may go to another physician, obtain a lawyer, and be scheduled for hearing before the Industrial Accident Commission.

Dr. J. L. Barritt of the California Industrial Accident Commission lists the following definitions of degrees of subjective symptoms.

1. *Minimal.* Annoying to the patient but no handicap.
2. *Slight.* Tolerated, but no handicap to work.
3. *Moderate.* Tolerated, but pronounced handicap to the patient's work.
4. *Severe.* Any work at all will precipitate pain.

One of the most frequent of severe injuries in orchard work is injury of the back, particularly a fracture or a sprain due to a fall from one of the three-legged ladders used for picking tree crops. The ladder itself is usually 12 to 14 feet in height and weighs 40 to 60 pounds. Skill has to be used in placing this ladder, as it will easily tip and lean if one leg should sink in a soft place or a gopher hole. Skill in balancing on the ladder must be acquired also. Many pickers are hired who have never handled a ladder or picked fruit before. Usually injuries resulting from a fall in which the patient lands on his buttocks or across his picking pail are compression fractures of the dorsal or lumbar vertebrae. The patient must then be treated in hospital for reduction of the fracture by hyperextension, and application of a body cast. Later a brace such as the Jewett or Taylor brace may be used. Lashier[1] expressed the opinion that a disability of one year should be accepted as probable in all crushing fractures of the vertebral body. Some patients are inclined to have symptoms for a period of years. McBride said that in cases of cervical fractures the patient may be expected to resume work in 30 to 40 weeks and that for lumbar and dorsal fractures at least 42 weeks should be allowed and the patient should be returned to light work as soon as possible.

Of 200 patients with back injuries who were observed by the author after one year, 83 had been disabled for one month, 25 for two months, 11 for three months, three for one year. In four cases no decision had yet been made as to status, and three failed to return for check-up.

Considering the great advance that society is making in care of the needy, one cannot but look upon the migrant farm worker as a neglected member.

His work is very important to the agriculture of this state, and steps should be made for the improvement of his lot which will also improve the efficiency of the worker on our farms and orchards. Preexisting conditions should be corrected as far as possible. If the patient is unable to afford the necessary treatment—which is many times the case—then he should be referred to the county hospital for care. This sometimes poses a special problem, for a migrant worker may be in Stanislaus County when he needs care, yet be a bona fide resident of Tulare County. Certainly patients who live in several counties during the year should be eligible for care where they are living.

Physical fitness cards should be carried by all farm laborers to keep them in a kind of work suited to their physical condition. This would tend to prevent injury, increase efficiency and lower the cost of the care and protection of workers. Physical evaluation should aim at the following points:

1. A measure of physical fitness of the individual to perform his duties without hazard to himself and others.

2. Assist workers in improving and maintaining their health.

3. Detect and correct the effects of poor living habits.

4. Establish a record as to physical condition and preexisting defects, habits and deformities.

5. Establish a record of accident proneness and offer steps toward solution.

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REFERENCES

1. Lashier, W.: Industrial Surgery, Principles and Problems, XVII 310.

2. McBride, D.: Disability Evaluation, Lippincott, p. 482-511, 1942.

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