



The human face of WorkCover: burns victim returns to work



Former truck driver Bill Nicholls has returned to work after suffering horrific acid burns to 20% of his body.

Bill is one of the 34,000* workers who are injured on the job in South Australia each year. But despite suffering horrific injuries, Bill has recently returned to work with the support of WorkCover and a return to work program.

A return to work program is designed to facilitate the timely and safe return to work for employees who have sustained a work-related injury or illness.

Research has shown that if you do not return to work within three months, that you have a much lesser chance of returning at all – one study showed that after a year off work due to injury or illness, the probability of returning was only 25%.**

“It’s a relief to get back to work,” says Bill. “It gets you down after a while, not working. It really gives you confidence to be able to make money again and take care of your family.”

Bill says that he was supported greatly by WorkCover throughout the rehabilitation and return to work process, and throughout five years of painful operations and skin grafts.

“WorkCover checked on me all the time in hospital and arranged for me to have special chairs at home. When I was ready to go back to work, they arranged for me to have a job analysis done and they came up with alternative duties for me in the office.

As part of his return to work program, Bill did several ‘work hardening’ stints with NQX Freight Systems, which helped to prepare him for full-time re-entry into the workforce, and he was supported throughout this time with workers compensation payments. He has since gained full-time work at NQX as a freight handler.

Bill, a Craigmores resident, was injured when sulfuric acid splashed all over his head, face, chest, stomach and legs, when he was helping to transfer it between two tankers. He was in hospital for 37 days.

“All the people at the Royal Adelaide Burns Unit were great. And my psychologist –he helped me to understand why I was feeling the way I was. I kept re-living the accident, and I had trouble staying alert and concentrating.”

Bill admits his recovery hasn’t been easy. He suffered a heart attack following the accident, which he believes was due to stress. He also had his licence to carry dangerous goods revoked, so he couldn’t go back to driving.

“I miss the driving and the freedom of the open road, being your own boss. I miss meeting new people every day and having a chat.”

He’s enjoying his new job, he says, and the fact that he has plenty of time to spend with his son Andrew (10). “I start at 5.30am and finish at three, so I can get home and spend time with my son.”

Obviously, Bill’s work injury has not just impacted on his working life. He had an active social life before the accident. “All that changed,” he says. “For a long time I didn’t go out.

“But recently I’ve started going back down to the local footy club for a couple of pints. No-one down there mentions the accident, or the scars, which is good. But if someone wants to ask questions, I’m fine with it. I’d rather people ask and find out the real story than draw their own conclusions.”

Bill has volunteered for the Julian Burton Burns Trust and the Burn Foundation of Australia, which runs retreats all around the country for burns victims.

“I know what happens when people get burnt. You have to experience that pain and carry those emotional scars to really know what’s going on.”

While Bill’s journey has taken him down to the depths of human experience, it’s testament to the power of his will that he has picked up the pieces of his life and put it back together. It’s his son he credits for pulling him through: “I wanted to see him grow up, and do all the things he wants to do. It’s as simple as that.”

* This approximate figure is based on claim numbers during 2007-08.

** Gerdtham & Johannesson, *Journal of Health Economics* 22, 2003; Engelman, Engelman & Patrick, *riZx Inc. quoting Hartford Insurance Group; WorkCover claims date 2005.*