

**The Importance of Notice of Accident
in New Mexico workers' compensation
By Judge Gregory Griego**

The workers' compensation law, section 52 -1-29 (A) NMSA, requires an injured worker to give written notice of an accident. The notice of the accident must be provided within 15 days of when worker knew or should have known of the accident occurrence. A notice of an accident must be provided to the employer, an employer's agent, or another person acting within supervisory capacity. Mosher v. Bituminous Ins. Co., 96 NM 674, 634 P.2d 696 (Ct. App. 1981).

Actual notice of an accident by a supervisor can substitute for the written notice required by the statute. Section 52-1-29 (A) NMSA. Actual notice can take many forms, including direct observation of an accident, or the consequences of an accident.

Notice to a health care provider normally will not constitute notice of an accident complying with the statute. Sanchez v. Azotea Contractors, 84 NM 764, 508 P.2d 34 (Ct. App. 1973).

Verbal notice to a supervisor may constitute actual notice, but only if it puts the employer on notice regarding the time, place and circumstances of a work accident. Bell v. Kenneth P. Thompson Co., 76 NM 420, 415 P.2d 546 (S. Ct. 1966). Verbal notice of an accident can be given to a supervisor by someone other than the worker. For example, a co-worker can inform a supervisor of the occurrence of a work accident.

Mere knowledge of an injury, without relation to a work accident is insufficient notice within the requirements of the statute. Herndon v. Albuq. Publ. Sch., 92 NM 635, 593 P.2d 470 (Ct. App. 1978). For example, the statement, "My neck hurts," would not constitute notice of an accident. The statement, "My neck hurts since I lifted an engine block yesterday," would be sufficient as notice to an employer.

Actual notice of an accident is subject to the same time limitations and requirements as written notice. See Rohrer v. Eidal International, 79 NM 711, 449 P.2d 81 (Ct. App. 1968).

The failure to give timely notice of an accident constitutes an absolute defense to a claim for worker's compensation benefits. Geeslin v. Goodno, Inc., 75 NM 174, 402 P.2d 156 (S. Ct. 1965). The defense is considered to be an affirmative defense, which must be raised by the employer. Mosher v. Bituminous Ins. Co., 96 NM 674, 634 P.2d 696 (Ct. App. 1981). The practical effect of this is that notice is assumed to have been given unless there is a specific denial of notice on the part of the employer. Employer bears the burden of proof establishing a lack of notice.

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Employer is required under Section 52-1-29 (B) NMSA to keep posted in a prominent location a poster promulgated by the Workers Compensation Administration regarding the law of workers' compensation. The poster is required by statute to have posted along with it forms of notice which have been approved by the Director of the Workers' Compensation Administration. Section 52-1-29 (C) NMSA.

If an employer fails to comply with the statutory requirement regarding the posting of the WCA poster, the time for providing notice by a worker of an accident can extend up to 60 days from the accident. Section 52-1-29 (B) NMSA. Trial decisions have held that the posting of the notice poster, without the notice forms, was inadequate and the time for notice was extended to 60 days. A trial decision has held that the placement of the poster and notice forms in a locked cabinet without ready access was inadequate.

Worker is expected to give notice of an accident when the worker knows or should have known of a work related injury and seriousness of the accident and its resulting injuries. In one case, the worker felt a minor neck pain at the time of the accident. The worker later related serious arm pain to the work accident. The time for giving notice began to run when the worker was aware of the relation between work and injury. Garnsey v. Concrete, Inc., 1996-NMCA-081, 122 NM 195. It is not uncommon for a worker to first become aware of the relation between a work incident and an injury when they are informed of that by a health care provider. Even where there is a clear relation between an accident and injury, the time for notice does not begin to run until a reasonable worker would appreciate the seriousness of the injury. Gomez v. B. E. Harvey Gin Co., 110 NM 100 (S. Ct. 1990).