

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

In the Matter of KAREN STRITZEL and U.S. POSTAL SERVICE,
POST OFFICE, Green Bay, WI

*Docket No. 01-1611; Submitted on the Record;
Issued March 5, 2002*

DECISION and ORDER

Before MICHAEL J. WALSH, MICHAEL E. GROOM,
A. PETER KANJORSKI

The issue is whether appellant has met her burden of proof in establishing that she sustained an injury to the knuckle of her right ring finger while in the performance of duty.

On January 31, 2001 appellant, then a 37-year-old rural carrier associate, filed a notice of occupational disease and claim for compensation, Form CA-2, alleging that the action of sorting mail caused the knuckle of her right ring finger to swell. On the reverse of the form, appellant's supervisor indicated that appellant stopped working on January 31, 2001 at 3:00 p.m. and returned to work the next day.

Evidence accompanying the claim consisted of a form, signed by Dr. Parveen Varma, a specialist in physical medicine and rehabilitation on January 31, 2001. Dr. Varma diagnosed an effusion of the knuckle joint due to overuse. He recommended that appellant bandage her finger for two weeks and released appellant to full-duty work immediately.

In a letter dated February 15, 2001, the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs advised appellant that the information submitted in her claim was not sufficient to determine whether she was eligible for benefits under the Federal Employees' Compensation Act.¹ The Office advised appellant of the additional medical and factual evidence needed to support her claim.

In response to the Office's letter, appellant submitted a second form report from Dr. Varma, dated February 14, 2001. He noted that on recheck of appellant's knuckle, she had no complaint, no swelling and no limitations. Appellant also submitted a narrative description addressing repetitive use of her right hand while sorting mail.

¹ 5 U.S.C. §§ 8101-8193.

By decision dated March 27, 2001, the Office denied appellant's claim. The Office found that, while the evidence of file supported that appellant did suffer from a swollen knuckle, the evidence did not establish that a condition had been diagnosed in connection with the work factor. Therefore, it was determined that an injury within the meaning of the Act was not demonstrated.

The Board finds that appellant has not established that she sustained an injury to her right ring finger.

An employee seeking benefits under the Act² has the burden of establishing that the essential elements of his or her claim including the fact that the individual is an "employee of the United States" within the meaning of the Act, that the claim was timely filed within the applicable time limitation period of the Act, that an injury was sustained in the performance of duty as alleged and that any disability and/or specific condition for which compensation is claimed are causally related to the employment injury.³ These are essential elements of each and every compensation claim regardless of whether the claim is predicated upon a traumatic injury or an occupational disease.⁴

To establish that an injury was sustained in the performance of duty in an occupational disease claim, a claimant must submit the following: (1) medical evidence establishing the presence or existence of the disease or condition for which compensation is claimed; (2) a factual statement identifying employment factors alleged to have caused or contributed to the presence or occurrence of the disease or condition; and (3) medical evidence establishing that the employment factors identified by the claimant were the proximate cause of the condition for which compensation is claimed or, stated differently, medical evidence establishing that the diagnosed condition is causally related to the employment factors identified by the claimant. The medical evidence required to establish causal relationship, generally, is rationalized medical opinion evidence. Rationalized medical opinion evidence is medical evidence which includes a physician's rationalized opinion on the issue of whether there is a causal relationship between the claimant's diagnosed condition and the implicated employment factors. The opinion of the physician must be based on a complete factual and medical background of the claimant, must be one of reasonable medical certainty and must be supported by medical rationale explaining the nature of the relationship between the diagnosed condition and the specific employment factors identified by the claimant.⁵

In this case, appellant has not provided sufficient rationalized medical opinion evidence supporting a causal relation between her knuckle condition and her work condition. Dr. Varma noted in two form reports that appellant had swelling in her right ring finger knuckle. He indicated that this condition was caused by overuse. While Dr. Varma noted that appellant

² 5 U.S.C. §§ 8101-8193.

³ *Elaine Pendleton*, 40 ECAB 1143 (1989).

⁴ *Daniel J. Overfield*, 42 ECAB 718, 721 (1991); *Victor J. Woodhams*, 41 ECAB 345 (1989).

⁵ *Id.*

claimed her knuckle swelled while sorting mail at work, he did not provide a medical opinion as to how appellant's condition was caused or aggravated by her work activities. His form reports do not contain any discussion of how the knuckle joint effusion was caused by factors of her employment. His reports are of diminished probative value.⁶

As appellant has failed to attribute her knuckle condition to her federal employment, the Office properly denied her claim.

The March 27, 2001 decision of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs is hereby affirmed.

Dated, Washington, DC
March 5, 2002

Michael J. Walsh
Chairman

Michael E. Groom
Alternate Member

A. Peter Kanjorski
Alternate Member

⁶ See *Lee R. Haywood*, 48 ECAB 145 (1996).