U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

In the Matter of CARL H. CURTISS and U.S. POSTAL SERVICE,
POST OFFICE, Miami, FL

Docket No. 98-1701; Submitted on the Record;
Issued January 19, 2000

DECISION and ORDER

Before MICHAEL J. WALSH, DAVID S. GERSON,
MICHAEL E. GROOM

The issue is whether the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs abused its discretion by refusing to reopen appellant's case for merit review under 5 U.S.C. § 8128(a) on the grounds that his application was untimely filed and failed to present clear evidence of error.

The Board has duly reviewed the case record and finds that the Office did not abuse its discretion by refusing to reopen appellant's case for further review as the request was untimely made and presented no clear evidence of error.

The most recent decision before the Board on this appeal is the Office's March 25, 1998 decision, denying appellant's request for reconsideration of the Office's decision dated February 6, 1995.[1] Because more than one year has elapsed between the issuance of the Office's February 6, 1995 decision and April 29, 1998, the date appellant filed his appeal with the Board, the Board lacks jurisdiction to review the prior Office decisions.[2]

To require the Office to reopen a case for merit review under section 8128(a) of the Federal Employees' Compensation Act,[3] the Office's regulations provide that a claimant must: (1) show that the Office erroneously applied or interpreted a point of law; (2) advance a point of law or fact not previously considered by the Office; or (3) submit relevant and pertinent evidence not previously considered by the Office.[4] To be entitled to a merit review of an Office decision

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[1] The Office denied appellant's claim on the grounds of conflicting evidence regarding whether the alleged incident occurred as appellant related it.

[2] *See* 20 C.F.R. § 501.3(d)(2).

[3] 5 U.S.C. §§ 8101-8193. Under section 8128 of the Act, the Secretary of Labor may review an award for or against payment of compensation at any time on his own motion or on application. 5 U.S.C. § 8128(a).

[4] 20 C.F.R. § 10.138(b)(1),(2).

denying or terminating a benefit, a claimant also must file his or her application for review within one year of the date of that decision.[5] When a claimant fails to meet one of the above standards, it is a matter of discretion on the part of the Office whether to reopen a case for further consideration under section 8128(a) of the Act.[6] The Board has found that the imposition of the one-year time limitation does not constitute an abuse of the discretionary authority granted the Office under section 8128(a) of the Act.[7]

In its March 25, 1998 decision, the Office properly determined that appellant failed to file a timely request for reconsideration. The Office rendered its last merit decision on February 6, 1995 and appellant's request for reconsideration was dated November 21, 1997, which was clearly more than one year after February 6, 1995. Therefore, appellant's request for reconsideration of his case was untimely filed.

The Office, however, may not deny an application for review solely on the grounds that the application was not timely filed. For a proper exercise of the discretionary authority granted under section 8128(a) of the Act, when an application for review is not timely filed, the Office must nevertheless undertake a limited review to determine whether the application establishes "clear evidence of error."[8] Office procedures provide that the Office will reopen a claimant's case for merit review, notwithstanding the one-year filing limitation set forth in 20 C.F.R. § 10.138(b)(2), if the claimant's application for review shows "clear evidence of error" on the part of the Office.[9]

To establish clear evidence of error, a claimant must submit evidence relevant to the issue which was decided by the Office.[10] The evidence must be positive, precise and explicit and must be manifest on its face that the Office committed an error.[11] Evidence which does not raise a substantial question concerning the correctness of the Office's decision is insufficient to establish clear evidence of error.[12] It is not enough merely to show that the evidence could be

[5] 20 C.F.R. § 10.138(b)(2).

[6] *Joseph W. Baxter*, 36 ECAB 228 (1984).

[7] *Leon D. Faidley, Jr.*, 41 ECAB 104 (1989).

[8] *Charles J. Prudencio*, 41 ECAB 499 (1990).

[9] Federal (FECA) Procedure Manual, Part 2 -- Claims, *Reconsiderations*, Chapter 2.1602.3(b) (May 1996). The Office therein states:

> "The term 'clear evidence of error' is intended to represent a difficult standard. The claimant must present evidence which on its face shows that the [Office] made a mistake (for example, proof that a schedule award was miscalculated). Evidence such as a detailed, well-rationalized medical report which, if submitted before the denial was issued, would have created a conflict in medical opinion requiring further development, is not clear evidence of error and would not require a review of the case record on the Director's own motion."

[10] *See Dean D. Beets*, 43 ECAB 1153 (1992).

[11] *See Leona N. Travis*, 43 ECAB 227 (1991).

[12] *See Jesus D. Sanchez*, 41 ECAB 964 (1990).

construed so as to produce a contrary conclusion.[13] This entails a limited review by the Office of how the evidence submitted with the reconsideration request bears on the evidence previously of record and whether the new evidence demonstrates clear error on the part of the Office.[14] To show clear evidence of error, the evidence submitted must not only be of sufficient probative value to create a conflict in medical opinion or establish a clear procedural error, but must be of sufficient probative value to *prima facie* shift the weight of the evidence in favor of the claimant and raise a substantial question as to the correctness of the Office decision.[15] The Board makes an independent determination as to whether a claimant has submitted clear evidence of error on the part of the Office such that the Office abused its discretion in denying merit review in the face of such evidence.[16]

In the present case, with his November 21, 1997 request for reconsideration of the February 6, 1995 decision, appellant submitted medical reports dated May 3 and June 15, 1995 from Dr. Jeffrey A. Crastnopol, Board-certified in orthopedic surgery. In his June 19, 1995 report, Dr. Crastnopol stated that he had been in error in his initial consultation with appellant on October 10, 1994 and that "[I]t is clear that the injury which he sustained when he bent over to lift the backdoor of the trailer actually occurred on October 4, 1994." He added that "The injury which he suffered to his lower back was directly related to his lifting of the back door of the trailer and that did occur on October 4, 1994." In his June 23, 1995 report, Dr. Crastnopol stated, "The episode of October 4, 1994 is believed to be the immediate causal injury regarding his low back problem."[17] However, this is still inconsistent with appellant's October 10, 1995 statement to his supervisor that he did know how he had injured his back.[18] This leaves conflicting factual evidence in the record.

As appellant's request for reconsideration did not raise a substantial question as to the correctness of the prior Office decisions or shift the weight of the evidence in favor of the claimant, it did not, therefore, constitute grounds for reopening appellant's case for a merit review. In accordance with its internal guidelines and with Board precedent, the Office properly performed a limited review of this evidence to ascertain whether it demonstrated clear evidence of error, correctly determined that it did not and denied appellant's untimely request for a merit reconsideration on that basis.

[13] *See Leona N. Travis, supra* note 11.

[14] *See Nelson T. Thompson,* 43 ECAB 919 (1992).

[15] *Leon D. Faidley, Jr., supra* note 7.

[16] *Gregory Griffin,* 41 ECAB 186 (1989), *reaff'd on recon.,* 41 ECAB 458 (1990).

[17] Dr. Crastnopol noted initially that appellant stated his injury occurred "several months" prior to his October 4, 1994 examination.

[18] The Board is also aware that thereafter, on October 17, 1995, appellant remembered hurting his back on October 4, 1995.

The Office, therefore, did not abuse its discretion by refusing to reopen appellant's case for merit review under 5 U.S.C. § 8128(a) on the grounds that his application for review was not timely filed and failed to present clear evidence of error.

As the only limitation on the Office's authority is reasonableness, an abuse of discretion can generally only be shown through proof of manifest error, clearly unreasonable exercise of judgment, or actions taken, which are contrary to both logic and probable deductions from established facts.[19] Appellant has made no such showing here.

Accordingly, the March 25, 1998 decision of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs is affirmed.

Dated, Washington, D.C.
January 19, 2000

Michael J. Walsh
Chairman

David S. Gerson
Member

Michael E. Groom
Alternate Member

[19] *Daniel J. Perea*, 42 ECAB 214 (1990).