Workers' Compensation Law

A Context and Practice Casebook

Michael C. Duff
University of Wyoming College of Law

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Series Editor's Preface

Welcome to a new type of casebook. Designed by leading experts in law school teaching and learning, Context and Practice casebooks assist law professors and their students to work together to learn, minimize stress, and prepare for the rigors and joys of practicing law. Student learning and preparation for law practice are the guiding ethics of these books

Why would we depart from the tried and true? Why have we abandoned the legal education model by which we were trained? Because legal education can and must improve.

In Spring 2007, the Carnegie Foundation published *Educating Lawyers: Preparation* for the Practice of Law and the Clinical Legal Education Association published Best Practices for Legal Education. Both works reflect in-depth efforts to assess the effectiveness of modern legal education, and both conclude that legal education, as presently practiced, falls quite short of what it can and should be. Both works criticize law professors' rigid adherence to a single teaching technique, the inadequacies of law school assessment mechanisms, and the dearth of law school instruction aimed at teaching law practice skills and inculcating professional values. Finally, the authors of both books express concern that legal education may be harming law students. Recent studies show that law students, in comparison to all other graduate students, have the highest levels of depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

The problems with traditional law school instruction begin with the textbooks law teachers use. Law professors cannot implement *Educating Lawyers* and *Best Practices* using texts designed for the traditional model of legal education. Moreover, even though our understanding of how people learn has grown exponentially in the past 100 years, no law school text to date even purports to have been designed with educational research in mind.

The Context and Practice Series is an effort to offer a genuine alternative. Grounded in learning theory and instructional design and written with *Educating Lawyers* and *Best Practices* in mind, Context and Practice casebooks make it easy for law professors to change.

I welcome reactions, criticisms, and suggestions; my e-mail address is michael.schwartz@ washburn.edu. Knowing the author(s) of these books, I know they, too, would appreciate your input; we share a common commitment to student learning. In fact, students, if your professor cares enough about your learning to have adopted this book, I bet s/he would welcome your input, too!

Professor Michael Hunter Schwartz, Series Designer and Editor Co-Director, Institute for Law Teaching and Learning Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Development

Preface and Acknowledgments

Unlike the situation existing in many law school courses, there are very few workers' compensation casebooks on the market. Most of the existing "workers' comp" books have been around, in more or less their present form, for some time—for long enough that I was familiar with them when I was a law student more than 15 years ago. When I first engaged in the practice of workers' compensation law, immediately after law school, I was struck by how sharply my work as a practitioner departed from my law school textbook exposure to the subject. Then, when I was privileged to become a law teacher, I began thinking more explicitly about the differences between a body of law as it is taught and the same body of law as it is practiced. This explicit reflection led to deeper ruminations about law school teaching and learning, and about the vague suspicion I had harbored for several years that law student instruction was not all it could be.

I was therefore extremely fortunate, while squarely in the midst of these deliberations, to encounter Professor Michael Hunter Schwartz, a gifted law school teacher and learning theorist, whom I was able to lure to the University of Wyoming College of Law to do an orientation presentation for our entering first year class. Professor Schwartz suggested that I read, without delay, the Carnegie Foundation's Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Practice of Law¹ and Roy Stuckey's Best Practices for Legal Education.² I did so, and reading these works validated completely the unease I had been feeling respecting traditional law school teaching. Of particular significance to me were the works' criticisms of the absence of law practice and professional identity formation in legal education, criticisms which I endorse.

Later, I was honored to be asked by Professor Schwartz to join a casebook series that he was organizing that would strive to respond to the teaching and learning research and criticisms underscored by the Carnegie and Stuckey studies. The book you are now reading represents my humble acceptance of that kind invitation.

Workers' Compensation Course Main Objectives

By the end of this course you will at a minimum be able to:

1. Determine whether a potential workers compensation claim is either barred by or made financially infeasible by preliminary procedural considerations.

^{1.} William M. Sullivan, Anne Colby, Judith Welch Wegner, Loyd Bond, & Lee S. Shulman, educating lawyers: preparation for the profession of law (2007).

^{2.} Roy Stuckey & Others, Best Practices for Legal Education (2007).

- 2. Determine whether an injury arguably arises out of and in the course of employment.
- 3. Determine where and how a workers' compensation claim should be filed.
- 4. Separate credibility from medical case issues, and determine what medical evidence will be required to make out or oppose a claim.
- 5. Identify, in the case of a deceased worker, dependents of the worker and determine whether they are eligible for death benefits.
- 6. Determine whether any third party actions are at issue in a case.

Essential Plan of This Text

I have deliberately endeavored to, wherever possible, treat legal issues in the manner and order practitioners—especially small law office practitioners accustomed to representing claimants—would most likely encounter them. Thus, the book does not dwell at length on issues that the practitioner is unlikely to encounter with significant frequency. In this respect the book differs from the scope and treatment of material encountered in other, more traditional workers' compensation casebooks and treatises. I do not, for example, begin the book with unnecessarily arcane questions of who is or is not an employer or an employee. In most cases you are likely to encounter, it will be perfectly clear that injured workers are statutory employees and that their employers are "employers" within the meaning of a relevant workers compensation statute. That is not to say that I omit discussion of the subject. Rather, I defer extended discussion of it until after material I deem to be of more pressing practical concern has been covered.

For instance, of immediate concern to most practitioners is whether a worker has provided prompt notice of a work-related injury to his or her employer, or whether the statutory period for filing a workers' compensation claim has elapsed. Also of critical preliminary importance to practitioners—especially to practitioners representing injured workers—is whether attorney's fees sufficient to support attorney involvement in a prospective claim, are available. If a worker has not provided notice of injury to his or her employer; if the time for filing a worker's claim has elapsed; or if attorney's fees are unavailable, a practitioner will not be able to reach the "substantive" issues of a workers' compensation claim.

For this reason, Chapter 2 of the book quickly takes up the preliminary "procedural" matters of Notice, Statute of Limitations Claim Periods, Attorney's Fees, and determination of the date of a worker's injury. Chapter 3 considers the critical substantive issues of whether an injury is an "accident" that has "arisen out of" and "in the course of" a worker's employment. Analysis of these similar but distinct questions establishes whether a worker's injury is sufficiently connected to employment to be "compensable," or eligible for compensation under an applicable workers' compensation statute. Chapter 4 discusses how the extent of a worker's incapacity is determined and explains how benefits are calculated. The text does not address problems associated with determining whether an injured worker is a "statutory employee" or whether an employer is a "statutory employer" within the meaning of a relevant workers' compensation law until Chapter 5. Chapter 6 explains whether and how the law of evidence applies in workers' compensation proceedings. Chapter 7 takes up the question of workers' compensation death benefits in contexts in

which a worker has died as a result of a work-related injury. Chapter 8 explores the exclusive remedy rule and how that rule interacts with third party actions and employer or worker fault in bringing about work-related injuries. Chapter 9 then discusses workers' compensation procedure and administration—some of the nuts and bolts of how claims are filed and processed. In Chapter 10, I discuss the interaction between workers' compensation and a few other statutory regimes governing many workplaces: the ADA, Social Security Disability, and ERISA. In the final chapter I expose students to actual practitioners' materials—some depositions and a client intake letter—and pose case problems revealed by the materials.

Because Workers' Compensation is most often encountered by practitioners as state statutory law, as various issues are explored you should always attempt to locate the law of the state in which you are currently planning to practice law.

Acknowledgments

My wife, Victoria, for her seemingly superhuman patience (especially with me).

My children, for being the unparalleled light of my life.

My parents, who never, ever gave up on me. (My late Dad did not live to see me finish the book but his exhortatory voice never left my head.)

My grandfather, George Parker, whose death from black lung disease at age 52 introduced me as a child to the solemnity of workplace justice.

My first legal mentors, Susan Maze-Rothstein and James J. MacAdam, who saw things in me I could not yet see.

Michael Hunter Schwartz, and all the supportive people I have met in connection with this wonderful Carolina Academic Press project.