# Role of accredited impairment assessors

## Information for medical practitioners

Impairment assessors are accredited by the Minister to whom the scheme is committed to conduct assessments that determine the level of whole person impairment that has resulted from a work injury. This fact sheet provides an overview of their role and responsibilities.

## Role of an accredited assessor

A worker with a permanent impairment that has resulted from a work injury may be entitled to receive lump sum payments and/or have access to serious injury support and common law, based on the degree of their whole person impairment.

The role of an accredited assessor is to assess injured workers and prepare assessment reports in accordance with the relevant *Impairment Assessment Guidelines* (the Guidelines) in order to determine:

* whether the worker’s condition has resulted in impairment
* whether the condition has reached maximum medical improvement
* whether the resultant impairment is permanent
* the degree of whole person impairment resulting from the work injury.

An accredited assessor in receipt of a whole person impairment assessment request is not to treat or accept the worker as a patient. However, in rare cases, it is not possible for another assessor to act on the request – either due to the nature of the injury or availability of assessors in that body system. In these cases, the worker’s accredited treating practitioner may undertake the assessment and be able to continue treating the worker as a patient.

Only medical practitioners who are accredited by the Minister can undertake impairment assessments for the Return to Work scheme in South Australia.

## The Guidelines

Whole person impairment assessments and subsequent reports must be conducted in accordance with and comply with the relevant edition of the Impairment Assessment Guidelines.

The Guidelines were developed to establish a common set of standards for whole person impairment assessment services across the Return to Work scheme in South Australia. Their purpose is to enable the consistent application of a defined methodology to permanent impairment assessments and reports.

The Guidelines are mostly based on the American Medical Association’s Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment, 5th edition and, in the case of Psychiatric assessment, on the Guide to the Evaluation of Psychiatric Impairment for Clinicians (GEPIC).

## Referrals

Accredited impairment assessors may receive requests for an assessment of whole person impairment from ReturnToWorkSA, claims agents or self-insured employers.

Under the Return to Work scheme, injured workers have the choice of assessor. ReturnToWorkSA cannot guarantee a minimum level of assessment requests. The list of accredited assessors is available on ReturnToWorkSA’s website [www.rtwsa.com](http://www.rtwsa.com).

If an assessor is unable to accept a request, they should contact the requestor immediately and explain their reasons for not agreeing to perform the assessment.

## Appointments

Examinations should be performed as soon as possible after the request for an appointment is made. Generally, three weeks or less is an acceptable period between a request and the assessment appointment. If the assessor is unable to see the worker for more than six weeks, they should not accept the request.

## Examinations

Workers may feel anxious about attending the whole person impairment assessment and part of an assessor’s role is to put the worker at ease. Effective communication is vital to make sure the worker is well-informed and able to cooperate fully in the process. Assessors must also be aware of and sensitive to the worker’s experience and needs, such as linguistic competence, level of comprehension, culture and injury.

It is important to be as punctual as possible with appointment times. A worker may become anxious if they have to wait for more than 30 minutes past the nominated appointment time.

It is important that assessors introduce themselves and explain their field of expertise and the assessment process. Plain English should be used, rather than technical words. It is also important to explain:

* the purpose of the examination
* your role as an assessor, that is, to provide an impartial impairment assessment, not to treat the worker or determine whether the treatment they are receiving is appropriate
* how the evaluation will proceed, including describing the part of the body to be examined, why it is to be examined, what the examination entails and the extent to which undressing is required.

Assessors should allocate sufficient time to make a fair and comprehensive assessment of the worker. It is important the worker feels the assessor is providing ample time for them to supply information they believe may be relevant to the assessment.

It is important that the worker has confidence that any examination is conducted professionally and appropriately.

## Conduct of physical examinations

As with other medical examinations, assessors should protect themselves and the worker by taking reasonable steps to preserve the worker’s privacy and modesty as much as possible during the assessment.

This includes providing a screen behind which the worker can undress and dress, or the assessor leaving the consulting room while the worker is undressing.

If an assessor is required to conduct an examination that may be perceived as invasive or sensitive, the assessor should carefully explain the reasons and nature of the examination and obtain the worker’s permission before examining them.

Assessors should always examine a worker in private, unless the worker has brought a support person to be present during the examination. Assessors may also choose to have an appropriate person (e.g. a nurse) present during the examination but must obtain the agreement of the worker first.

It is expected that the assessor will have access to view online radiology.

## Other people present at the examination

If a worker speaks little or no English, or has a hearing impairment, the requestor will arrange for a qualified interpreter to attend the examination, and will advise the assessor that the worker will be accompanied by an interpreter. Friends of the worker, family members or children must not act as interpreters. The assessor should stop the examination if this occurs and contact the requestor immediately to reschedule the examination.

The worker may have another person present for support, but it is undesirable for children to be present. The support person should not answer questions or contribute to the assessment unless the worker has difficulty communicating or requires physical assistance.

## Further testing

Assessors should not generally order additional radiographic or other investigations for the assessment of whole person impairment.

Such tests should only be ordered when the results are crucial to determining the degree of impairment. No additional radiographic or other investigations can be ordered without requestor approval.

Where the assessor considers that further investigation is essential for a complete evaluation to be undertaken and deferral of the evaluation would considerably inconvenience the worker (e.g. when the worker has travelled from a country region specifically for the assessment), the assessor may proceed to order the appropriate investigations, provided there is no undue risk in carrying out these investigations to the worker. This should only occur in exceptional circumstances and requires the approval of the requestor.

## Multiple impairments

The Guidelines provide specific direction on assessing multiple impairments and assessors should follow these closely. In addition to this, the request information will also include specific directions regarding the injuries to include and assess and deduct in the assessment.

## Reports

Reports play a key role in determining a worker’s entitlements in the Return to Work scheme. A good report will help ensure a worker’s entitlements are determined quickly so they can move on with their lives and focus on returning to work. A poor report may lead to costly litigation and delay a worker’s return to work and receipt of benefits.

Reports must comply with the relevant Guidelines and should be timely, easily comprehended, thorough and accurate. They must also be comprehensive and explain medical terminology so the requestor can act quickly on the information provided. They must also specifically address any questions asked in the request information regarding whole person impairment.

If the report requestor asks any questions that are not related to whole person impairment, responses should not be included in the impairment assessment report. The assessor may contact the report requestor and ask whether they would like additional responses included in a separate report.

## Confidentiality

A number of people may read an assessor’s report, including the worker, case manager and other medical practitioners, so it is important not to disclose any information about the worker that is of a personal nature except where it is relevant to the impairment assessment.

## Report format

All reports must be in the format required by the Return to Work Scheme. A copy of the report template is available on the ReturnToWorkSA website at [www.rtwsa.com](https://www.rtwsa.com/service-providers/assessment-services/impairment-assessment/impairment-assessor-news-and-resources).

## Performance monitoring

In order to ensure the delivery of appropriate services and consistent application of the Guidelines, ReturnToWorkSA will monitor the performance of accredited impairment assessors on an ongoing basis.

Assessors who are identified as providing services and reports that do not comply with the relevant Guidelines or meet expected service standards may have their accreditation reviewed. The assessor performance monitoring framework document can be found on [www.rtwsa.com](https://www.rtwsa.com/service-providers/assessment-services/impairment-assessment/impairment-assessor-news-and-resources) or a copy can be requested by email to [wpi@rtwsa.com](mailto:wpi@rtwsa.com).

## Ongoing education

To maintain their accreditation, assessors are required to attend continuing education if requested by ReturnToWorkSA, on behalf of the Minister.

## Where can I get more information?

The ReturnToWorkSA website [www.rtwsa.com](http://www.rtwsa.com) provides additional information on whole person impairment and resources for completing assessments.

For further information, including how to become an accredited assessor, please email ReturnToWorkSA at [wpi@rtwsa.com](mailto:wpi@rtwsa.com) or contact Injury Assessment Services on 08 8238 5960.