

LEE'S STORY:

A new career as a teacher.

My RSI started in 2003 when I was doing a lot of filing and transcribing from files onto the computer. Handling files was a problem as well as the keyboard. The computer wasn't ergonomically set up; it was a very poor work station. I was working casually and had monthly renewable contracts. They wouldn't say anything to me until the last day about whether I'd be coming in on the Monday. This was quite stressful. I was working six hours a day -- I didn't know at the time that you have to take breaks through the day. Because I wanted to drop my kids off at school and then be home by three, I would just work for six hours straight through and not take a break at all. It was poor workplace practice.

After about 12 months, my injury wasn't getting better and I put in a workers' compensation claim. About four months later, I went to the doctor and said that I had been continuing to work with a lot of pain; she said to have three weeks off. I went back on what they called a graduated return, starting on four hours a day and going up to about five hours a day. I was put on more or less the same duties.

No one at work was unkind or said anything derogatory. But the place where I worked on contract had undergone a review of the whole department and they were planning staff cuts. People, particularly those on contract, were very stressed because they knew they'd be the ones to get cut because it was difficult to cut permanent public servants' employment. The whole environment in the department was really very stressful. When I left for the three weeks' break, it was obvious when I came back they would eventually get rid of my job. When I came back, they asked me to continue the sort of work I had been doing but there seemed to be confusion about what I was there for. I didn't have proper supervision. They ended up sticking me in a room by myself and gave me all sorts of odd jobs. Meanwhile, I did have a workplace rehabilitation provider. At one stage they provided me with a machine to put the electrodes on my arm to try to work out which muscles were most stressed. You were to work on the computer in such a way that you were not setting off these beepers all the time -- that was pretty stressful!

In the end, I was in a lot of pain and was absolutely exhausted. I would get home after four hours of work and just lie down. I was getting to the point where I was buying TV dinners. I just couldn't face any more work. I was in a lot of pain, and treatments were not very effective. I went to a chiropractor at one stage, looking for magical cures that don't eventuate. I knew that the only thing that would benefit me was that I would have to give up work. I kept saying to myself: 'What's more important, my work or my health?' I did say to them eventually: 'I've just had it and I'll just resign'. The doctor gave me another week off and the rehab person said to

me: 'Whatever you do, don't resign'. Then my workplace decided that they weren't going to renew my contract so that was virtually the end of my working for them.

I had endless difficulties with Comcare and eventually they decided to cease my payments, six months after I had finished work. Then I went to a solicitor. He wasn't very competent, but I did eventually get a settlement. From that period onward, I haven't had any further contact with Comcare. The settlement wasn't very satisfactory: not only did Centrelink take a huge amount out of the settlement but all my back pay was counted as one year's income for tax purposes and I had to repay my HECS debt.

I found dealing with Comcare extremely stressful, despite knowing there's a process involved in which they deny liability and send you off to a whole lot of sham doctors who say there is nothing wrong with you. When you're involved in the compensation system, you're always looking over your shoulder because you think you could be videoed or have people following you around to see you doing something—then they'll bring this out as evidence that you are not injured. I thought: 'I don't want to live life like that. I'd rather finish it and, because I'm a single parent, go back on sole parent benefit on which I can marginally survive, rather than being in the system where I'm having to deal with all this stressful stuff'. I decided that I had to do what it took to get better or, even if I didn't get better, I didn't want to be under the pressure that Comcare would inflict on me.

Since the settlement, my health has improved a fair bit, although I still have a lot of pain in my arms. I find any kind of vibration quite hard to deal with; long trips in the car, even as a passenger, are very difficult and I have to persuade my kids to mow the lawn . I've become quite good at voice operated computing and have managed to complete a postgraduate university qualification in education part-time. While I'm not physically able to work full time, I have found very satisfying part-time work as a teacher that pays reasonably well.

I tried lots of different treatments, many of which didn't work. When I can afford it, I find massage very helpful – but the right therapist is the key for me. The impact on my finances has been severe – I've struggled on single parent's pension for years and am now on a part disability pension.