Panel of Physicians

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The basics of a valid panel:
Under O.C.G.A. § 34-9-201(b)(1), a “valid traditional panel of physicians” must include:

1. At least six physicians, professional associations, or corporations of physicians who are reasonably accessible to the employee
2. One or more physician that is an orthopedic surgeon
3. Two or fewer industrial clinics
4. At least one minority physician where feasible

Board Rule 201 states that if a doctor on the panel of physicians declines to treat a worker who has previously received care from another panel physician, the employer/insurer must, as soon as is reasonably possible, add one more doctor to the worker's panel.

A self-insured employer or an employer's insurer may enter into a contract with a managed care organization (MCO) in accordance with O.C.G.A. § 34-9-208 and Board Rule 208, so long as the employees covered by the agreement receive medical care in accordance with the terms of the contract and each agreement conforms with the certification requirements outlined in O.C.G.A. § 34-9-208.

It is no longer necessary for doctors, organizations, or professional groups to be "nonassociated" members of a panel.

What employers should know:
In order to preserve the integrity and validity of a legitimate panel of physicians, employers are involved in the procedural standards that must be adhered to. According to O.C.G.A. § 34-9-201(f), an employee may choose any physician to perform services at the employer's expense if the employer fails to provide any of the procedures outlined in this section. Employers must do the following:

- Post the panel of physicians prominently on the company property
- Make every effort to ensure that staff members are aware of the panel's purpose
- Make every effort to ensure staff members are aware of their right to choose a panel physician in the event of an injury
- Ensure staff members receive the necessary support in making contact with panel physicians.

Tips for employers:

- Upon hiring and again in the event of an on-the-job injury, provide employees a copy of this document and explain to them the goal of the physician panel.
- Display a copy of the physician panel in multiple places that are easily accessible to staff members.
- When an injury occurs, let the worker choose a doctor from the panel; record this decision by having the worker circle his preference and sign a copy of the panel.

What insurers should know:

Insurance companies and businesses should collaborate to keep the panel of doctors valid. Insurance companies should routinely check the panel in partnership with employers to ensure that all doctors on it are active practitioners at the addresses provided. Insurers ought to be as informed as possible about every doctor on the employer's panel and make sure that the doctors are within a reasonable travel time from the office.

Tips for insurers:

- If at all possible, try to have a panel with more than six providers listed on it, provided that it satisfies O.C.G.A. § 34-9-201(b)(1)'s standards.
- Develop a relationship and a line of communication with the doctors on your employer's panel.
- When an employer reports an injury, use that opportunity to brief them on the status, reliability, and operation of their panel.