

Surprise drug test for member on LTD

THROUGH HELL and back. That's how 32-year BC Hydro employee Pat Keaney describes her last couple of years. For the first time in her life, she was off work on Long Term Disability (LTD) and was shocked to be confronted by a surprise drug test.

Keaney, who normally works at the Edmonds Field Services office, has been off work on LTD since November 2002. A combination of terrible family tragedies and unrelenting stressful workloads brought on a severe clinical depression.

She does not feel helped to return to work by the LTD carrier Sun Life; in fact, she felt harassed and has described her experience for other COPE 378 members. The following is her delineation of recent events while she was off work.

"My doctor said that in addition to clinical depression, I also suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder so Sun Life wrongly concluded I was off work due to stress. Each week Sun Life had a new demand that I fax reports or releases and see specific doctors. That was OK at first because BC Hydro had a Return-To-Work (RTW) department and the RTW Coordinator helped me jump the hurdles," Keaney said.

Then after a corporate reorganization, BC Hydro reduced staff in the RTW department.

"Sun Life and the various RTW people demanded I see a psychiatrist who wrote me drug prescriptions. Then Hydro suggested I see a counselor or psychologist." Keaney also pays for group therapy sessions herself. She had planned to go back to work May 2, 2005.

"In the past few months, Sun Life made frequent phone calls that left me in tears. They made bureaucratic demands for tests, medical reports and release forms. I couldn't handle the berating phone calls from Sun Life telling me I brought on my own problems. I felt defenseless until I contacted the union."

In December 2004, she got a letter from Sun Life Financial threatening to cut her off disability payments unless she sent all her doctors' clinical notes and records for the past two years. Her doctor faxed her medical file to Sun Life.

"In February 2005, Sun Life told me they had set up an independent medical examination (IME). They said I was to bring all my medications and that they would review the report results.

me in a room and told me to drink 10 cups of water. Meantime, they had asked me to leave my purse in the other room and actually checked my pockets. I had to turn my pockets inside out," she recalls.

"It took nearly three hours to fill that cup before they would let me leave. I had no idea what was happening. They wouldn't even let me go across the street and check my parking meter.

"I got home and phoned Sun Life to ask why this happened. Their letter said the appointment was for 'preliminary paperwork' not for drug tests. I called the COPE office and spoke to Union Representative Kerrie Irving. Even BC Hydro's latest RTW person, Vanessa Clarke expressed surprise.

"Sun Life phoned and apologized for tricking me about the drug tests."

The whole experience has been humiliating. "I lost my rights and human dignity because I was sick and collecting LTD benefits. This is just the latest in a long line of harassment," says Keaney.

"Then, because the Sun Life doctor did not approve of the medication prescribed by my family doctor,

Sun Life has recommended a 28-day drying out period. I must taper off my medication before I can return to work.

"This is so embarrassing to talk about. I've been made to feel guilty. Other COPE members on LTD may not know what to expect."

Union Representative Kerrie Irving commented, "This is Pat's experience, from her point of view. There are always two sides or more to every story. We have been working closely with BC Hydro's Return-to-Work department to resolve this issue.

"We all agree it's very unusual to request such vast amounts of medical evidence and to surprise LTD claimants in a return to work situation with this kind of drug test.

"In all the years I've been a Union Rep, I've never seen an insurance carrier spring this kind of test on a member," said Irving.

It is important COPE 378 members know their rights when off on medical leave. Ensure your doctor is informed about what is being requested medically. If you need assistance, call your union representative in the COPE union office. ■



Taking a moment in the sun with her pal Duke, Pat Keaney from BC Hydro says she has felt harassed and intimidated by insurance carrier Sun Life while collecting long-term disability benefits.