



AMA Guides® to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment

Using current methodologies makes permanent impairment ratings more reproducible, equitable and accurate



Q & A with Douglas W. Martin, MD, and J. Mark Melhorn, MD.

AMA Guides Editorial Panel Co-Chairs

The AMA Guides Editorial Panel is enabling fair and equitable impairment ratings by delivering the most current medical advancements through updates to the AMA Guides® to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment. Read about the importance of using the most current methodologies to evaluate patients from the AMA Guides Editorial Panel Co-Chairs, Doug Martin, MD, an occupational medicine physician from Iowa, and Mark Melhorn, MD, a hand specialist orthopaedic surgeon from Kansas.

Q Why is using the most current medicine in the AMA Guides important?

Dr. Melhorn: New medical advances improve outcomes beyond what is anticipated or commonly experienced in the past, or conversely, new research can identify that impairment may be more substantial than previously believed.

Q Can you provide examples of new medical advances that are incorporated within the AMA Guides and how permanent impairment ratings are impacted?

Dr. Martin: When I started practice in the early 1990s, cardiac arrhythmias put a lot of people out of work. We had medications that treated these conditions, but the side effects led to other limitations on activities of daily living. Now we have electrophysiological ablation—no medications, just a “one and done” procedure with limited adverse effects on daily living and patient function. However, older editions of the AMA Guides rate arrhythmias with consideration of outcomes associated with the outdated treatment protocol, often leaving patients with higher ratings that are not reflective of their true condition.

Dr. Melhorn: This is also true for innovation in arthroscopic surgery for rotator cuff repairs for shoulders and femoroacetabular impingement for hips, for example. Arthroscopy may provide less invasive treatments. With newer procedures, we see return to work or sports sooner. These advancements in healthcare require new approaches to rating impairment that are not addressed in editions of the AMA Guides that were published over 20 years ago. New procedures require updated methods for providing fair and equitable impairment ratings for functional loss.

Dr. Martin: That's right. And sometimes, the medicine is missing altogether. The sixth edition is the only edition of the AMA Guides to address ankle replacement surgery impairment, so in older editions of the AMA Guides, such as the fifth edition, there is no guidance on how to rate this, and physicians just have to do their best with the methods provided in that particular edition, which may lead to inconsistencies in practice. Medical science does not evolve uniformly across body systems, so use of current science is critical to achieving consistent and fair impairment ratings.

Q What is the impact on patients?

Dr. Melhorn: Providing timely, accurate and equitable impairment ratings allows patients to focus on recovery and return to work with a reduction in distractions that result in additional functional loss. Treatment goals include better outcomes, which are impacted by appropriate evidence-based impairment ratings.

Q What was the rationale behind the 2024 rewrite of the Musculoskeletal chapters?

Dr. Martin: We had reached an inflection point where a thorough revision of methodologies was both necessary and possible. Our goal was to improve ease of use for impairment evaluations while increasing interrater and intrarater reliability.

Dr. Melhorn: The 2024 update improves accuracy of impairment ratings by reducing complexity of the process. This simplification benefits the entire AMA Guides community.

Q What changed with AMA Guides Sixth 2024?

Dr. Melhorn: The musculoskeletal panel developed a streamlined five-step process that enhances efficiency, produces more concise and focused reports, and ensures clearer communication of impairment ratings. It also aligns more closely with diagnostic classifications and impairment guidelines, improving the accuracy and consistency of evaluations, especially in complex cases. Updates preserve the integrity and utility of impairment evaluation while offering advancements in application.

Dr. Martin: This new approach is more systematic and ensures reliable and meaningful assessments of an examinee's condition. It's a win-win approach because this further uncomplicates rating procedures while improving accuracy, reproducibility and equity. Notably, studies demonstrated that the 2024 update does not significantly impact overall impairment values when compared to the original Sixth Edition.

Q What about training and education?

Dr. Melhorn: Compared to the 2008 edition, the 2024 edition features an intuitive impairment rating process that reduces the training burden. This makes implementation easier and the content more accessible to a broader range of professionals. For those already familiar with the Sixth Edition's methods, the transition should be relatively seamless. Notably, studies demonstrated that the 2024 update does not significantly impact overall impairment values when compared to the original Sixth Edition.

Q What is the impact to stakeholders?

Dr. Martin: The transition to AMA Guides Sixth 2024 can be made without compromising reliability. Stakeholders will benefit from a more structured approach to confirming clinically relevant diagnoses.

Dr. Melhorn: AMA Guides community members, including medical professionals, worker representatives, insurers, legal experts, and policymakers, can rely on AMA Guides Sixth 2024 for consistent and accurate impairment evaluations. The improved consistency and user-friendly format have the potential to generate cost savings within the workers' compensation system. That said, realizing these benefits will depend on appropriate acceptance by relevant jurisdictions and legislative bodies.

About the AMA Guides

The American Medical Association supports the adoption of the most current edition of the *AMA Guides® to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment* to provide fair and consistent impairment evaluations.

The [AMA Guides Editorial Panel](#) has a transparent update process, which creates a pathway to continuously update the AMA Guides with current best evidence-based science.

AMA Guides Sixth 2024 is the most current version of the AMA Guides and AMA Guides Sixth. The AMA Guides are maintained exclusively online at [AMAGuidesDigital.com](#). Educational support can be found through [AMA EdHub™](#).

More information on the AMA Guides

[Review Changes to AMA Guides Sixth 2024](#)

[Stay informed about AMA Guides Editorial Panel meetings](#)

[Subscribe to AMA Guides Digital](#)

