

**IOWA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE APPEALS BUREAU**

RICARDO R GARCIA-MARTINO
Claimant

KRAFT HEINZ FOODS COMPANY
Employer

APPEAL 17A-UI-04583-LJ-T
**ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
DECISION**

OC: 03/19/17
Claimant: Appellant (2)

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a – Discharge for Misconduct
Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) – Excessive Unexcused Absenteeism

STATEMENT OF THE CASE:

The claimant filed an appeal from the April 18, 2017 (reference 03) unemployment insurance decision that denied benefits based upon a determination that claimant was discharged due to excessive, unexcused absenteeism. The parties were properly notified of the hearing. A telephone hearing was held on May 17, 2017. The claimant, Ricardo R. Garcia-Martino, participated. The employer, Kraft Heinz Foods Company, did not register a telephone number at which to be reached and did not participate in the hearing. Claimant's Exhibits A through D were received and admitted into the record.

ISSUE:

Was the claimant discharged for disqualifying job-related misconduct?

FINDINGS OF FACT:

Having reviewed all of the evidence in the record, the administrative law judge finds: Claimant was employed full time, most recently as a machine operator, from August 20, 2016, until March 3, 2017, when he was discharged for absenteeism. Claimant admits he was absent from work on March 3, March 4, March 5, and March 6. Claimant testified that he called into the attendance line on March 3 and reported that he was having a medical procedure and would be off work for several days. Claimant also stated in the message that he would bring a doctor's note to the employer upon his return. Claimant did not call in the days that followed March 3. However, he testified that he had previously been absent for several consecutive days for similar medical issues, and the employer only required him to call in the first day of the absence. Claimant was not aware his job was in jeopardy due to absenteeism. He had received one verbal warning for attendance. However, he testified that this was the first of several steps in the employer's progressive discipline policy, and he did not receive any further disciplinary actions before his discharge.

REASONING AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

For the reasons that follow, the administrative law judge concludes claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed.

Iowa Code § 96.5(2)a provides:

An individual shall be disqualified for benefits:

2. Discharge for misconduct. If the department finds that the individual has been discharged for misconduct in connection with the individual's employment:

a. The individual shall be disqualified for benefits until the individual has worked in and has been paid wages for insured work equal to ten times the individual's weekly benefit amount, provided the individual is otherwise eligible.

Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) provides:

(7) Excessive unexcused absenteeism. Excessive unexcused absenteeism is an intentional disregard of the duty owed by the claimant to the employer and shall be considered misconduct except for illness or other reasonable grounds for which the employee was absent and that were properly reported to the employer.

The employer has the burden to prove the claimant was discharged for work-connected misconduct as defined by the unemployment insurance law. *Cosper v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 321 N.W.2d 6 (Iowa 1982). The issue is not whether the employer made a correct decision in separating claimant, but whether the claimant is entitled to unemployment insurance benefits. *Infante v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 364 N.W.2d 262 (Iowa Ct. App. 1984). What constitutes misconduct justifying termination of an employee and what misconduct warrants denial of unemployment insurance benefits are two separate decisions. *Pierce v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 425 N.W.2d 679 (Iowa Ct. App. 1988).

Excessive absences are not considered misconduct unless unexcused. Absences due to properly reported illness cannot constitute work-connected misconduct since they are not volitional, even if the employer was fully within its rights to assess points or impose discipline up to or including discharge for the absence under its attendance policy. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7); *Cosper*, supra; *Gaborit v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 734 N.W.2d 554 (Iowa Ct. App. 2007). Medical documentation is not essential to a determination that an absence due to illness should be treated as excused. *Gaborit*, supra. Excessive unexcused absenteeism is an intentional disregard of the duty owed by the claimant to the employer and shall be considered misconduct **except for illness or other reasonable grounds** for which the employee was absent and that were properly reported to the employer. Iowa Admin. Code r. 871-24.32(7) (emphasis added); see *Higgins v. Iowa Dep't of Job Serv.*, 350 N.W.2d 187, 190, n. 1 (Iowa 1984) holding "rule [2]4.32(7)...accurately states the law."

The requirements for a finding of misconduct based on absences are therefore twofold. First, the absences must be excessive. *Sallis v. Emp't Appeal Bd.*, 437 N.W.2d 895 (Iowa 1989). The determination of whether unexcused absenteeism is excessive necessarily requires consideration of past acts and warnings. *Higgins* at 192. Second, the absences must be unexcused. *Cosper* at 10. The requirement of "unexcused" can be satisfied in two ways. An absence can be unexcused either because it was not for "reasonable grounds," *Higgins* at 191,

or because it was not “properly reported,” holding excused absences are those “with appropriate notice.” *Cosper* at 10.

The employer has not established that claimant had excessive absences which would be considered unexcused for purposes of unemployment insurance eligibility. Claimant’s final absence was related to personal illness. Claimant provided unrefuted testimony that he reported this in a way that had been acceptable to the employer in the past. Because claimant’s final absence was both properly reported and due to illness, this final absence is not unexcused absenteeism. Since the employer has not established a current or final act of misconduct, the history of other incidents need not be examined. Accordingly, benefits are allowed.

DECISION:

The April 18, 2017 (reference 03) unemployment insurance decision is reversed. Claimant was discharged from employment for no disqualifying reason. Benefits are allowed, provided he is otherwise eligible. Any benefits claimed and withheld on this basis shall be paid.

Elizabeth A. Johnson
Administrative Law Judge

Decision Dated and Mailed

lj/rvs