

Health Cost Management Tips From the Pros

AS EMPLOYERS, HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS FACE THE SAME ISSUES YOU DO – AND THEY BRING AN EMPOWERING MESSAGE

By JULIE AHO

While health care professionals can apply their medical expertise to help manage costs, their wild card is also the same: Will employees become engaged in taking more responsibility for their health?

“The greatest challenge is the human condition and rugged individualism,” said Jo Ann Hoag, vice president of network development and chief nursing officer at St. Luke’s. “People tend to resist making changes to improve their health. The question is will we make the best choices and participate as fully as we can? The good news is that people are more aware of issues like smoking and obesity, which affect diseases of the lungs and heart. And these

conditions are controllable.”

Companies can encourage employees to take charge of their well being by offering health fairs, flu shot clinics, cholesterol and blood pressure checks and health education programs.

“I don’t think there’s a one-size-fits-all method,” Hoag said. “If employees think there’s something in it for them, there’s more acceptance. People can resist paternalism and mandates, so think about who’s

the best messenger for your employees. Sometimes it’s the expert outsider, such as a health care professional. It’s also important for the employer to model the behaviors they want employees to have.”

Some diseases, such as hypertension, osteoporosis and diabetes, are silent in the beginning. “The disconnect is that people think, ‘I can’t imagine it ever happening to me,’” Hoag said. “Somehow, we have to get people engaged in controlling their own destiny, and in the discipline of eating right, getting some exercise and watching their blood pressure.”

Hoag noted the new HealthShare program (see article on page 34) as beneficial for small businesses. “It’s one way to get involved and it provides prevention incentives,” she said. “The Fit City initiative is a great resource for employers. And our St. Luke’s speaker bureau provides a broad array of topics. We also have community education programs that businesses can attend.” Many resources and health tips are available at www.slhduluth.com. St. Luke’s produces a “Healthy Perspectives” newsletter that can be sent to employers in hard copy format that’s available online, as well.

Our region has a higher incidence of heart disease than other parts of the country and an aging population means more cardiac issues. Some factors relating to diseases and medical conditions are beyond people’s control. “The exciting technology piece is the work universities are doing, such as the University of Minnesota, on genetics,” Hoag said. “We’re making inroads in genetics and that would be the biggest



Jo Ann Hoag – St. Luke’s

breakthrough to alter the negative influences of diseases which potentially impact each other – pulmonary, cancer, stroke, heart disease and diabetes.”

At SMDC Health System, Chief Administrative Officer John Smylie said his organization is highly aware that lifestyle choices can drive up to 25 percent of total health care costs. When it comes to good health and preventive care, he ranks these areas as important: 1) safe habits, such as always wearing seatbelts and bicycle/motorcycle helmets; 2) a healthy diet; 3) getting exercise – or as he prefers to call it, “activity” – on a daily basis; 4) quitting smoking; and 5) limiting alcohol and drug use.

“We started to look at the care we offer and what we can do about positively affecting lifestyle choices,” Smylie said. “While heart disease and cancer often make headlines, people may not know that 60 percent of Minnesotans are overweight and 30 percent are considered obese. Obesity is a major health challenge – it stresses the heart, joints, kidneys and really, the entire body. Some obesity can be due to genetics. However, it’s important to not just look at genetics, but the habits of the family. We’re creatures of habit, so the key is to develop new habits that result in better long-term health.”

To support its employees, SMDC launched a Healthy Benefits program. The first step is a confidential assessment of blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar and daily physical activity. Employees enroll online and take part in a program to help them make lifestyle changes. About 1,300 SMDC employees are paying decreased insurance premiums because of their participation.

“Our health expenses have not increased so far this year, like they did last year,” Smylie said. “We’re not out to make everyone a jock, and the very nature of many people’s jobs is sedentary. The key is to start the journey by developing a plan, taking baby steps, and not trying to do everything at once. It’s empowering to invest in your body, just like you invest in your financial plan. I think you have to make this stuff fun for employees, too.”

SMDC engages employee interest



John Smylie – SMDC Health System



Diane Holliday-Welsh – SuperiorHealth Center

through activities like its “35 Ton Challenge.” Participants so far have lost a cumulative seven tons of weight. “Some departments challenge each other,” Smylie said. “We also have healthy foods in the cafeteria with more labeling of products. We brought Weight Watchers consultants in and have a Heart to Heart program about heart disease, particularly as it affects women. We access Duluth Clinic prevention programs regarding heart disease, diabetes and asthma. We hosted a farmer’s market right onsite for employees. And our health fair was a huge success.”

SMDC offers online resources at smdc.org, including great recipes for healthful eating and a wide variety of health care topics. It also sponsors the “Healthy Living” program hosted by anchor Michelle Lee on the Northland’s NewsCenter. The show airs the last Monday of the month at 6:30 p.m. on NBC 6.

Vice President of Care Delivery Diane Holliday-Welsh of SuperiorHealth Center said the most important advice she has for employers is to design a health benefit for employees that ensures they have an annual exam by a primary care physician.

“People tend to rely more on emergency care sometimes, and that’s not the optimal time to go,” she said. “I think people get locked into their own perceptions in defining these terms: What is wellness? What is health? It really boils down to variables such as cholesterol, blood pressure and body mass index. Risk factors are easily identified, but left untreated, they can manifest into significant issues. Slight alterations in lifestyle choices can reap valuable health status rewards.”

Holliday-Welsh also said it’s important to have a true appreciation of what employees need to perform their jobs, such as safe lifting procedures, adequate rest and proper ergonomics at work stations. “I also think there’s a balance between the role of employer and employee,” she noted. “Employers can help assure an employee’s well-being at work, but not at home. Employees must take responsibility for their personal lives.”

Offering a health/wellness program is an asset for any employer, said Holliday-Welsh: “Some people are self-motivated and do fine by themselves, and others need a coach or group inspiration as a model to

achieve their health and wellness goals. The support and social aspects of a group can be key to successfully adopting healthier habits. Ask employees to help you design a program.”

What about cash as an employee incentive, as in paying lower premiums for being a nonsmoker or participating in a weight loss program? “For some, cash is a good reward and for others, it’s not,” Holliday-Welsh noted. “We can tell people to stop smoking, for example, but can’t always understand why they do it. It’s the same way for overeating, which may relate to stress levels and poor nutrition. Unless you identify the root of the problem, it’s hard to identify the ‘carrot’ for employees to change behaviors. As an employer, I’ve gained an appreciation of these issues. We don’t know what goes on in employees’ lives; there can be very stressful things going on that affect their physical and mental well-being.”

The key, she said, is to offer support and encouragement to start making improvements: “We can all identify healthier foods that we like to eat. And we can all identify some physical activities we like to do. Not everyone wants to run a marathon. Regular exercise is one of the best ingredients toward better health. As well, regular exercise is one of the proven methods of offsetting dementia-related losses. There is a common thread between inactivity and dementia in that both will put great strain on the health care system in the future.”

At the end of the day, it’s always up to patients to adhere to treatment plans and goals set by their physician and health care team. “The most important thing is to have that annual visit with a primary care physician,” said Holliday-Welsh. “It’s making an investment in your health, just like you do for your IRA.”

FirstSolutions’ Joyce Mireault, vice president of health management, marketing and human resources, said businesses have a “huge need for navigational assistance in health and wellness services. More employers are taking action by encouraging employee engagement; some are

offering different benefits or incentives for healthy lifestyle choices.”

Many health management programs focus on chronic conditions recognized by a triggering event. FirstSolutions reaches out to the “walking wounded”: those who don’t know they’ve developed (or are at risk of developing) a health condition that has very adverse effects if left untreated.

To that end, FirstSolutions has just launched FirstPath Advantage, a new incentive-based predictive outreach and health management program to assist companies and their employees. “We offer blood screenings and a complementary health risk assessment addressing 17 different lab results, including blood pressure, body mass index, nicotine use, et cetera,” Mireault said. “These voluntary screenings help employees identify their potential for developing certain diseases or conditions and provide them a health baseline.”

FirstSolutions co-branded this new product with a partner that conducts the blood tests and provides the incentive package. “And we’re the first firm in the U.S. to offer this incentive based predictive outreach program,” Mireault said. “We actually piloted the product at FirstSolutions and integrated it with our employee health plan.”

If test results indicate adverse health conditions, employees receive notification, plus coaching to change those results. “Employees work with an RN Care Navigator to develop a personalized plan,” Mireault said. If results show dangerous or life-threatening conditions, employees are notified immediately by phone. All results and outreach is confidential. Each employee receives personal results; employers receive high-level aggregate reports.

“We want to get to people before they have a significant health event, because that affects their lifestyles forever,” Mireault said. “It also impacts the employer’s total claims and trends. Then we help employees manage these conditions before diseases really set in; that’s key to the employee’s health and keeping health care costs affordable for everyone. Doing so

FirstSolutions

From left: Stacia Cohen, Bruce Brown, Joyce Mireault, Rebecca Sienko.



positively affects productivity and absenteeism rates. Employers really get a return on investment.”

Blood screenings and health risk assessments may initially result in employee claims rising. “For example, an employee may need medication to control their risk of high cholesterol,” Mireault. “But that’s a lot less costly than

a heart attack or stroke.”

It is to a company’s benefit – and employees’ benefit – to proactively manage health care issues, Mireault said: “Employers who stay on top of these issues will have healthier employees working at their full capacity.” **D**

Julie Aho is editor of the Duluthian.



If this is your work force, you don’t need us.

Sure, if you employ a team of mechanical robots, you probably don’t worry about lost productivity from accidents and repetitive injuries. But if you need more than an oil can to keep your staff up and running, then turn to us for worksite evaluations, post-injury therapy and training.



1420 London Rd., Suite 102 • Duluth • 728-3774 and 211 S. Boundary Ave. • Proctor • 624-5215
www.turningpointtherapy.com