



workplace wellness

Health Promotion Pays

Health Screenings and Wellness Programs Can Help Employers Lower Health Care Costs

By Kari Bailey

Rising health care costs continue to be a source of frustration for employers. However, some companies are finding ways to cut costs by encouraging healthier workers—and offering a healthy environment. Today, the scope of “employee benefits” has expanded from medical, dental and retirement programs to offering benefits such as free flu shots, discounts at health clubs and healthy snacks in break rooms.

Why has this organizational expansion into the realm of personal employee health occurred? For one, employers are recognizing the impact health in the workplace can have. Dan Duquette, who is the chair of the health department at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, as well as a professor of public health, explains, “I’m seeing more workplaces offering health screenings as a benefit. For one, it shows that the business cares about their employees—that’s a very powerful message.” Most American employers—about seven out of 10, in fact—believe that they have the responsibility to promote wellness among their workers, according to a survey by the American Management Association.

Companies also see benefits themselves when offering their employees a healthy work environment. “Turnover rates among employees drop,” continues Duquette, “and the length of employee service increases. Furthermore, health insurance costs in companies that offer health screenings begin to stabilize and decline somewhat.”

Convenience, however, is one of the biggest benefits that onsite health promotion offers employees. “There are a lot of people who

don’t go to their personal physician,” explains Kris Orson Jones, manager of education at Medica, a health plan in Minneapolis. “Having a worksite health program is a convenient access point for employees.”

Preventive Health by the Numbers

Each year, chronic illnesses—many of which could be treated and prevented at an earlier stage—cost employers billions in lost productivity and absenteeism.

The trend towards increasing obesity in the United States presents some of the most staggering statistics. According to the National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases, as the prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased in the United States, so have related health care costs—both direct and indirect. Indirect costs include the value of wages lost by people unable to work because of illness or disability, as well as the value of future earnings lost by premature death.

Complicating this epidemic even more is the fact that overweight and obese people have increased risk factors for many diseases. A greater problem in the future will be the ongoing problems around childhood obesity. “Childhood obesity will have a significant impact on cancer, diabetes and heart disease—and potentially other chronic diseases such as arthritis,” says Duquette, who also serves on the National Board of Directors for the American Cancer Society.

These nationwide health problems underscore a huge problem in our society—namely, that preventive health services and the

promotion of healthy lifestyles continue to be underutilized health strategies in the United States. Employers, however, have a key opportunity to use the workplace as a setting for preventive health screenings and can identify employees in need of behavioral and lifestyle counseling. Duquette explains, “Another benefit of employers offering health screenings and providing health education for their employees is that they can bring information home to their family.” Because when it comes down to it, according to *American Medical News*, corporate wellness and health prevention programs can improve employee health and save companies money.

A Convenient Solution

More employers are considering their role within employee health to be significant. From the global outsourcing and consulting firm Hewitt Associates, 74 percent of U.S. companies reported offering employee health screenings, while 71 percent offer health education and information to their employees.

Luckily, it’s not just that employers are offering these incentives to employees—employees are using them as well. According to the results of a workplace wellness management survey conducted by the Wellness Program Management Advisor and Wellness Junction, health screenings are among the best-attended wellness programs. “We have a lot of employers that have identified that it is beneficial to them to provide health screenings to employees,” says Caroline Jackson, public health nurse of occupational health and wellness at Virginia-based Mount Rogers Health District. Oftentimes for employees, onsite work screenings are a matter of convenience. “If you bring it right to the employees,” adds Jackson, “they’re more likely to use it.”

The most common health screenings include:

- Blood pressure, total cholesterol and HDL for the detection of heart disease
- Glucose for the detection of diabetes
- Tuberculosis
- Vision and hearing screenings
- Bone density test for the detection of osteoporosis

However, an increasing number of companies and health-related services can also offer less common employee screenings. “We refer to the screenings directly related to chronic illnesses as secondary prevention,” says Duquette. “Anything companies can do to detect a condition early is going to have a significant impact on costs down the road.”

Some of these screenings include:

- Mammography for the detection of breast cancer
- Colonoscopy/sigmoidoscopy for the detection of colon cancer
- Skin examination for the detection of melanomas
- Pap smears

Health risk appraisals are also becoming an increasingly popular option among companies. These appraisals help identify potential health risks that are related to lifestyle and family history. Medica offers a health assessment risk tool employers can give to their employees to assess lifestyle behaviors. Says Jones, “This information that identifies different health behaviors and

risk factors helps reduce health care costs and improve quality of life. For employers, it improves absenteeism and productivity rates and the overall company culture.”

Balancing the Bottom Line

The impact that health screenings and wellness programs have on not only employee health but also the employer bottom line is constantly being measured. Today, chronic diseases—such as cardiovascular disease (primarily heart disease and stroke), cancer and diabetes—are among the most prevalent, costly and preventable of all health problems, according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. Furthermore, the medical care costs of people with chronic diseases account for more than 75 percent of the nation’s \$1.4 trillion medical care costs—with many of the costs falling to employers.

These statistics alone support the need for organizations to promote healthier workplaces. However, many organizations are not able to hold a health screening event or promote a wellness program due to staffing or space restraints. Running large-scale wellness programs can also be costly and time consuming. Several different options, however, can help time- and cash-strapped organizations encourage healthy behaviors among their employees.

One option is getting creative in paying for health screening services. Some employers pay for all of it; while other employers offer the screenings but have the employees pay for it. “Some employers do payroll deductions. So while they aren’t paying for the screenings themselves, they are making it more accessible for the employee,” says Jackson. Another option is for employers to promote wellness through discounts or reimbursements at local health clubs.

Recognizing some of the growing needs of organizations to offer health screenings and employee wellness programs—but lacking the expertise or staffing to accomplish this—more companies are offering these services. Vaccination Services of America offers nationwide health promotion services from health screenings to flu shots. “We have nurses around the country that provide onsite screenings for our clients,” explains Alan Kohll, president of Vaccination Services of America.

Adding in the Wellness Component

Offering health screenings alone are not enough. “Employers are realizing they need to do more than health screenings. They also need offer disease management and wellness programs for employees,” says Kohll.

For several years, Medica has offered their employer groups a wide array of tools and services focused on wellness education. From print materials and display boards to videotapes and health education workshops focusing on health and wellness topics, these tools are designed to enhance health wellness programs employers might already have.

Other programs offer promotional tools to make facilitating a wellness program even easier. Heart At Work Online is the American Heart Association’s worksite health promotion pro-

continued on page 124

continued from page 123

gram. This low-cost program offers more than 30 different activities to supplement existing employee wellness programs. Heart At Work Online enables worksite coordinators to easily conduct health promotion activities that inspire employees and their families to lower their risk of heart disease and stroke.

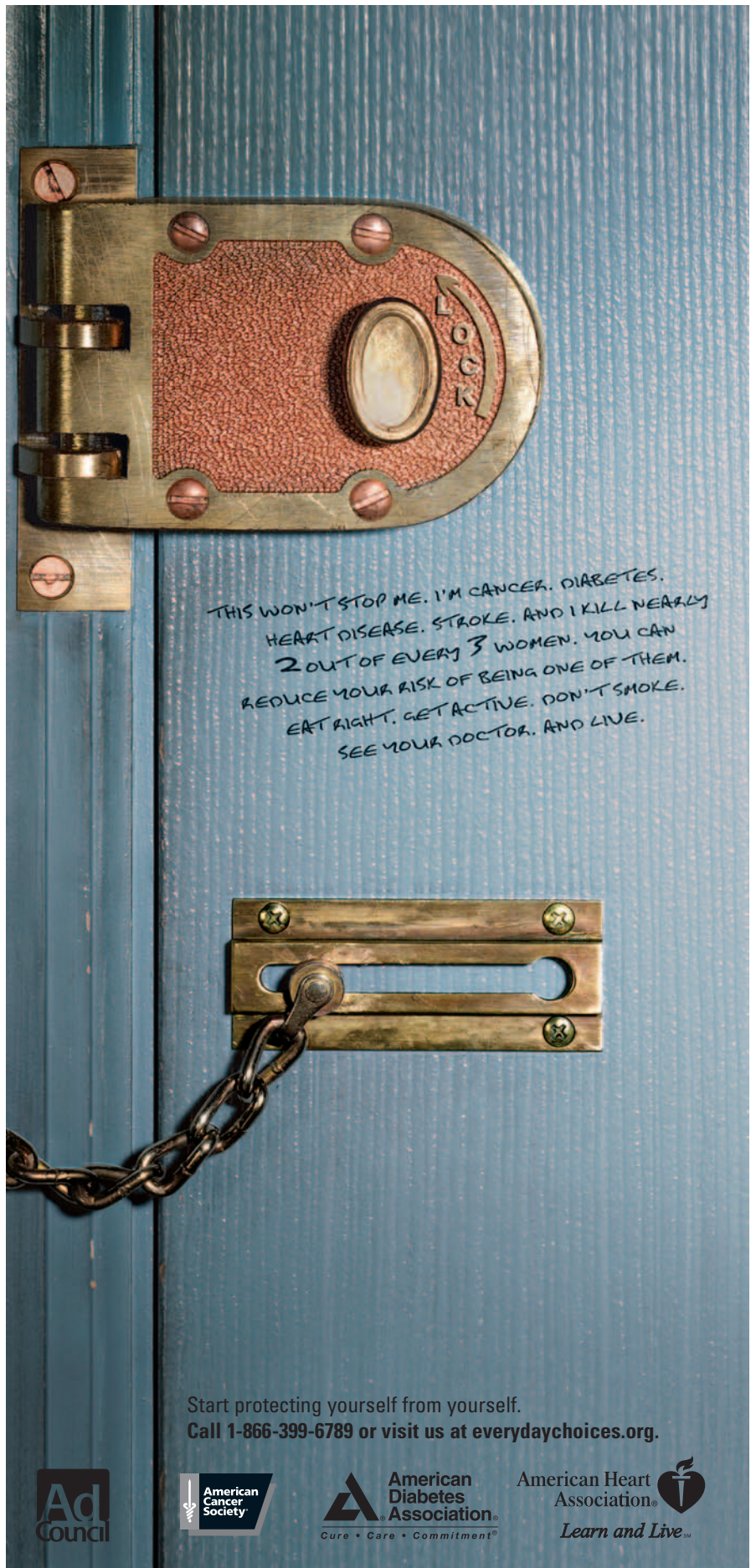
"Companies take risks in a lot of other areas," concludes Duquette. "Health promotion is an area where they need to take a little bit of a risk and put some resources and money into the health of their employees and their families. Because down the road, these risks will pay them and the rest of us big dividends." ■

For More Information

- National Cancer Information Center: (800) 227-2345
- Vaccination Services of America: (888) 434-4358, www.vsamerica.com
- Heart at Work program: www.americanheart.org/haw
- Foundation for Medical Evaluation & Early Detection: www.fmed.org

Prevention & Early Detection Save Lives—and Health Care Dollars

- Coronary heart disease is the primary cause of permanent disability among U.S. workers, constituting some 19 percent of Social Security disabilities.
- Nearly one-third of all adults in the United States (approx. 61.3 million) are considered obese. Approximately 300,000 adult deaths in the United States each year are attributable to unhealthy dietary habits and physical inactivity or sedentary behavior.
- The annual direct costs of treating osteoporosis fractures of people in the workplace in the United States, Canada and Europe alone is approximately \$48 billion.
- Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States.
- For localized melanoma (melanoma that has not spread beyond the outer layers of the skin at the time of detection) the average five-year survival rate is 96 percent.
- A survey conducted by Louis Harris & Associates found that one of three men didn't have a regular doctor to go to when they were sick or needed medical advice, compared with one of five women.



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