

Supporting Employee Health

Studies show incentive-based workplace wellness programs promote healthy lifestyles among employees



SESSION: THE TIME IS NOW — WILLING WELLNESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Presenter: Thomas J. Van Gilder, MD, JD, MPH, National Medical Director for Wellness, Humana, Inc. (pictured)

Three factors conspire today to unsettle even the most stoic observer of health-care in the United States: increasing health-related risks (in particular, obesity); rising health-care costs; and, new laws and regulations governing health-care delivery and finance.

Health-care financing has fallen increasingly on the individual consumer, and is poised to shift from its employer-centered position. In light of these factors, wellness — maximizing current and future mental and physical health — remains a key component in containing health-care costs. And the workplace, where many people spend much of their time, will remain a critical environment for improving individual and community wellness.

Fortunately, an effective workplace wellness program can address each of these three factors. First, recent studies demonstrate that educating, emphasizing and incentivizing risk-factor awareness among employees and their families can help lower health-related risks. For example, in a recent study, an incen-

tive-based, health-promotion program demonstrated a significant decrease in the prevalence of physically inactive members.

Keys to success include creating a culture of health and wellness and providing strong incentives (e.g., a premium contribution differential), providing comprehensive follow up for people who have risk factors identified, and rewarding people for creating and adhering to a plan to reduce health risks.

Second, people engaged in wellness programs have lower health-care costs. A recent study estimated that health-care cost reductions attributable to health-risk reduction would be 18 percent of total health-care costs if health risks in the population were minimized. Another study demonstrated that overall health-care costs were about 19 percent lower among highly engaged people than those with low engagement in the wellness program. Keys to success include incentivizing engagement, sustaining programs over time, and providing comprehensive follow up.

Third, recent proposed regula-

tions associated with federal health-care reform laws increase amounts that some employers can offer as incentives for participation in wellness programs. And, a number of provisions in the federal health-care reform laws mandate or encourage payment for preventive services for insured persons as well as measurement and reporting of preventive services by health-care providers.

Though health-associated risks and health-care costs are increasing, and new regulations are causing employers to reconsider their health plans, emphasizing wellness and prevention — encompassing physical and mental health — can help reduce risks, reduce costs and is supported by recent legislation. Therefore, a comprehensive wellness program that encourages employees and their families to understand their health risks, create a plan to reduce their risks, and support and reward people for following through on their plans is a timely, effective investment in employee and family health and well-being. ■

Wellness remains a key component
in containing health care costs.