



Robert Chamberlain / Photo by Shannon Fontaine

April 7, 2013

## Wellness partnerships cut health costs

By Robert Chamberlain

I want to thank The Tennessean for Walker Moskop's March 19 article on Healthways' recent study correlating employees of higher well-being with lower health care costs and better workplace productivity.

Employers have offered health insurance since the 1940s as a way to recruit, reward and retain a top-tier workforce. While the landscape is changing, this still holds true today. More than half of the U.S. population enjoyed employment-based health insurance coverage in 2011, and among the employed population aged 18 to 64, more than two-thirds (68.2 percent) had health insurance through their own employer or another person's employer, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

With a high percentage of employers sponsoring health benefits, employers cannot only attract and keep employees, they can impact the health of populations. This is done by shedding the traditional approach to supporting employee health through case and disease-management interventions and working with local hospitals and health systems to implement evidence-based wellness programs.

While the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act seeks to reduce the cost of health care and widen its availability, employers (payers) continue to struggle with the rising cost of health insurance. A new study released March 26 by the nonpartisan Society of Actuaries estimates that individual premiums will rise on average by 32 percent within three years, partly due to the high-risk pools entering eligibility as a result of the PPACA.

The PPACA acknowledges the impact employers can make on the health of the U.S. population and enhanced incentives for offering workplace-sponsored wellness programs. For example, the federal government increased the maximum reward in health-contingent programs to 30 percent from 20 percent of the total cost of coverage. This may increase to 50 percent in the future.

Some employers are ahead of the game. Of the nearly 800 employers responding to a recent Aon Hewitt survey, 83 percent of companies use some type of incentive in wellness programs and 79 percent offer rewards for participating in such programs.

Payers who continue to provide employer-sponsored health care coverage should take advantage of incentives and partner with the health experts in their community, the local hospitals and health systems, to implement cost-effective and proven wellness approaches that focus on the highest risk factors driving the highest claims costs, including heart disease, diabetes, emotional health and cancer.

Local health experts serve as third parties for wellness programs and offer employees assurance that their health will remain anonymous to employers and insurance companies. Employers only know if employees are meeting their goals to receive rewards or incur penalties for not participating. Wellness administrators at hospitals and health systems connect employees with local resources, have access to evidence-based health risk analyses, provide the necessary interventions and match workers with the appropriate community-based resources and primary-care physicians. Most importantly, hospital-administered population-health programs motivate employees to take an active role in managing their health and have the potential to imbibe employees with a lifetime of healthy behaviors.

By partnering with health systems, employers benefit from the implementation of leading-edge initiatives proven to positively impact health risks, reduce claims expense and attain sustainable partnerships with the health experts most dedicated to the enhancement of community health.

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