

PRACTICING HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

| Sita Ananth, MHA |

“Our employees are our greatest asset!” is a slogan you often see emblazoned in hallways, boardrooms, and lunchrooms throughout companies in America. But what does that truly mean to the individual employee? Employees in the United States work longer hours and have less vacation time than their European counterparts, while surpassing them in productivity.¹ In fact, today, half of all American adults are happy with their jobs, down from 60% in 1995.²

From the employer’s perspective, the question to be asked is what a healthy employee is worth, says Wendy Lynch, PhD, executive director of The Health as Human Capital Foundation. Until recently, researchers would answer this question in terms of savings in medical costs. However, she argues, reduction in medical costs are merely a secondary outcome. Healthy employees have improved function at work, lower absentee rates, and lower rates of on the job injury. What is being missed in the old thought process is the notion of human capital—the many abilities and resources the employee brings to the organization, including skills, abilities, experience, and attitude.³

In our hospitals, the service-oriented nature and emotional demands of the work makes it particularly important that we take care of these workers. Take nurses, for example, the largest workforce in our hospitals. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, analyzed data from the Nurses’ Health Study, a historic study on women’s health launched at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in the mid-1970s. Surveys are completed every two years by over 200,000 female registered nurses about their health, including smoking habits. According to the most recent data, the smoking rate among registered nurses nationwide is nearly 12%, which although lower than the national average, is of concern in that nurses who smoke may be less apt to support tobacco control programs or encourage their patients to quit. Also, despite seeing smok-

ing’s health effects firsthand, the rate at which US nurses quit smoking has been no faster than for other women, researchers say. In another study about obesity in nurses, researchers found that those who were overweight or obese tend not to pursue the subject with their patients, even if it was necessary or they had the opportunity to do so.⁴

Whether the rate of addiction among nurses is greater than that among the general population is unknown. But nurses are especially vulnerable to addiction to prescription drugs because of work-related stress such as critical care work, working rotating or night shifts, and access and knowledge of medications.⁵ In fact, the use of illegal drugs by emergency department nurses was three times greater than by other nurses.⁶

So, what are employers doing about this? Fortunately, over the decades, a greater number of employers have been investing in the health of their employees. A 2005 Hewitt and Associates survey showed that the number of employers offering wellness and disease management programs rose from 73% in 2004 to 83% in 2005. The reason for this trend is no surprise—the cost of employee healthcare rose by 6% in 2008 and is predicted to continue to rise in 2009. Employers are looking at putting more teeth into employee health management programs in the hopes that encouraging better employee health habits would lead not only to lower health spending but to a more productive workforce.⁷

The Wellness Councils of America, the nation’s leading resource for workplace wellness for over two decades, has identified through their Well Workplace process seven key benchmarks of a successful workplace wellness program: (1) capturing CEO support, (2) creating cohesive wellness teams, (3) collecting data to drive health efforts, (4) carefully crafting an operating plan, (5) choosing appropriate interventions, (6) creating a supportive environment, and finally and importantly, (7) evaluating outcomes.⁸ Two winners of their

Well Workplace Award are Grinnell Regional Medical Center in Grinnell, Iowa, and Baptist Health South Florida in Miami—one, a small rural community hospital with 400 employees, the other a large multihospital system with over 12,000 employees. Each have, in their own way, met the criteria of the Wellness Councils of America for protecting and enhancing the health and well-being of every employee and have made this part of the very fabric of the organization, not something extraneous and peripheral to the core business functions.

At Grinnell Regional Medical Center, the passion and leadership for its programs comes from CEO Todd Linden, who believes in creating a healing environment not only for patients but for employees. As a self-insured employer, they quickly realized that keeping their employees healthy not only made good sense but was good for the bottom line. The program started small with educational awareness programs but quickly grew into a program initiated three years ago called I Choose Health, where enrolled employees who participate in a health risk appraisal, meet certain minimum requirements for exercise, and have physicals as recommended, are eligible for a \$400 credit that they can use toward their health insurance premiums, and a potential \$1,500 they can use at the hospital’s integrative health clinic for massage, chiropractic, and other services. Their on-site fitness center is also used widely by employees. “The message we want to send is that taking care of yourself can show in your paycheck,” says program manager Cory Jackson.

Two new initiatives launched in 2009 are a mandatory training for all employees in the HeartMath stress relief system—Linden and Jackson firmly believe that an unhealthy response to stress is the foundation of ill health—and second, an Optimal Healing Environments workshop for nurses in basic techniques in healing touch, reflexology, and more advanced HeartMath techniques they can use both with patients

and in their own self-care. These efforts have translated not only into substantial dollar savings (eg, an employee who did not participate in the I Choose Health program incurred approximately \$4,300 for conditions related to being overweight or obese, compared to \$82 for those who did participate), but is keeping Grinnell at the top of its class in Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores and consistently high employee satisfaction scores, despite the downturn in the economy and no salary increases for the last two years.

Baptist Health South Florida has been attracting awards for decades: *Fortune's* 100 Best Companies to Work For, 100 Best Places to Work in Healthcare (awarded by Modern Healthcare), Best Hospital for Healthy Lifestyles by the National Business Group on Health, and Fit Friendly Company by the American Heart Association. The key, says Wayne Brackin, chief operating officer of Baptist Health South Florida, is the genuine belief and commitment by the organization to taking care of their employees, not merely giving lip service. And the employees know it. More than 12,600 employees working in five hospitals and several outpatient clinics and urgent care centers are served by the innovative programs that span all areas of employees' lifestyles, from exercise and diet to health screenings and health management.

In 2001, the current activities of the various hospitals were united and expanded under one umbrella, the Wellness Advantage program. Existing fitness centers were renovated and new ones constructed. In a

letter from CEO Brian Keeley, an avid fitness and nutrition buff, employees were encouraged to participate. Wellness coaches were hired to design educational materials, hold health fairs (almost 60 fairs were held last year), and conduct monthly screenings at all 17 locations. Employees are incentivized to participate in a health risk appraisal, and by targeting high-risk employees, the system was able to save almost \$1,800 per person in healthcare costs, says Maribeth Rouseff, assistant vice president of the Wellness Advantage program. Cafeteria and vending machine offerings were also studied for fat content, sodium, and trans fats (Baptist Health South Florida is a trans fat free-organization now). A Wellness Advantage meal for \$3 was added to the menu, and all vending machines offer healthy options.

Clearly, both of these examples demonstrate the vital importance of leaders in creating a culture of health and wellness in their organizations. It is crucial that they model the behaviors they expect of their employees and challenge them to do the same.

The Healthy Workforce Act introduced by Sen Tom Harkin (D, Iowa) in 2007 provides tax incentives to companies that invest in wellness programs for their employees. To qualify, the company's program would have to include the following components: a health awareness and education program, a behavioral change program, an employee engagement committee, and incentives for participation, such as a reduction in health premiums. Perhaps the passage of this bill will result in well-deserved rewards for conscientious employers and

help incentivize those who are still contemplating the benefits of investing in the health of their employees.

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