

Managing disease

Using disease management programs to increase employee health **Interviewed by Amy Borghese**

Employee absenteeism contributes to millions of dollars in lost production each year. Employees who suffer from chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and asthma, can benefit from disease management programs that provide information and tips to members with chronic illnesses to ensure they have information to help them stay healthy and keep working.

“It is the right thing to do,” says Bruce Niebylski, M.D., associate vice president, medical affairs, with Priority Health. “You are helping people stay healthy and helping treat diseases. Education is much more efficient for both the employee and employer than only prescribing a medication.”

Smart Business spoke with Niebylski about disease management programs and the benefits they provide.

What purpose do disease management programs serve for employees?

Disease management programs were originally designed to care for four different ailments: diabetes, asthma, maternal child diseases and congestive heart failure. Such conditions were selected because studies showed patients suffering from these diseases were not receiving the treatment needed. Employer groups suggested implementing disease management programs to help employees follow regimens, attend regular doctor visits, and find qualified doctors in their area, and for any extra care they required.

Today, many more diseases have been added to disease management programs. Patients suffering from such diseases often have a hard time following a schedule of regular doctor appointments and their prescription drugs are often very costly. Disease management programs have been implemented to help employees deal with such issues and receive the appropriate care for treating their condition.

How can disease management programs benefit an employer's bottom line?

Diabetes accounts for 5 percent of the health care population and half of the money we spend on health care is spent on diabetics. If such a disease can be managed,



Bruce Niebylski, M.D.
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there will be a reduction in additional costs for side effects associated with diabetes such as stroke, dialysis and system failure.

Many disease management programs are showing a positive return on investment. Statistics show that for every \$1 spent to pay for disease management there are \$4 in savings. Over the years, there has been controversy regarding whether disease management programs make treatment more efficient and help reduce costs.

It is difficult to track cost savings with these programs. Financial analysis can be used to show the return on investment for such programs. Disease management programs are very effective for patients with high intensity diseases such as asthma and congestive heart failure. These fluctuating diseases cause patients to visit hospitals regularly. These programs are designed to keep patients healthier, to increase their quality of life and keep them out of the hospital for additional costly treatments.

What if employees feel disease management programs are too intrusive?

This is a real concern that disease management programs have faced. Because of

that resistance, it is important to separate employees' private information from the employer. Employers only receive information on which diseases are present in the employee population but it is not disclosed which employee has a certain disease. Employers need this information so they can ensure they are selecting the correct health plans for their employees' needs in the future.

Some employers offer their employees all the resources needed to properly treat their disease but are faced with resistance in participation. For many programs, there is only a 10 to 30 percent uptake in disease management programs. This means that for every 10 people who are invited to participate in the disease management program, you only get one to three takers. It may be beneficial for employers to use incentives to get employees enrolled in a disease management program.

Are there on-site practices employers can implement to help employees prevent/manage chronic illnesses?

On-site programs had been offered by many disease management companies. It was found employees were hesitant to participate because they didn't want their employer to figure out they had a disease and have that information affect their employment status. Now on-site programs simply include general screenings where the results are only presented to the employee in general information sessions.

Employers can create a wellness atmosphere for employees through simple things like decorating stairwells and pumping in music so employees can walk the stairs on their lunch hour or break. Employers can offer healthy foods in vending machines. Some employers allow employees to leave early a few days a week if they belong to a gym. <<

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