It Takes Two

Employers and employees can work together to tackle chronic disease By Sonya Felix

Chronic conditions such as depression, cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes cost employers big dollars in declining productivity due to increased absenteeism and presenteeism rates, as well as soaring drug costs and claims for short- and long-term disability. Speakers at the 12th annual Solutions in Drug Plan Management conference held on October 11, in Mississauga, Ont., acknowledged that the impact of chronic disease on the workplace will continue to grow.

“Chronic disease is expensive for employers, but there are opportunities to make a difference,” said Bonnett. “Studies estimate that 40% to 70% of the cost of chronic disease can be avoided through lifestyle change, and, as you peel away the silos together.”

One of the “elephants in the room” during any discussion about managing drug costs is whether employees share a sense of responsibility for controlling drug spending. Mark, a member of the Sanofi Canada advisory board, highlighted several findings from the 2012 Sanofi Canada Healthcare Survey that suggest employees may take their obligation more seriously than employers think they do.

For one, nearly two-thirds of employees responding to the survey indicated they view coverage for higher-cost drugs as a very high priority, and the majority say they feel an obligation to help their employer control plan costs. When it comes down to what employees would be willing to do to assist with those costs, opinions varied: 62% said they would “shop around” when plan sponsors offer more effective treatments for their chronic conditions, many of which occur together, he said. Today, cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes account for 70% of deaths. And, since older people are more likely to have a chronic disease, the aging workforce implies that the impact of chronic disease on the workplace will continue to grow.

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New Ideas

Although new and innovative drugs may offer more effective treatments for chronic diseases, many employers wonder how they can afford the expense. An expert panel—Marilee Mark, vice-president, marketing, group benefits, Manulife Financial; Suzanne Lepage, private health plan strategist; Peter Zawadzki, pharmacist and professional affairs executive, Pharmasave National; and Bernie Menante, managing partner, Strategic Answers Inc.—looked at the issue from several different angles.

The prevalence and complexity of mental health have received much attention in recent years, and today there is greater acceptance of the need to promote psychological well-being in the workplace.

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Chris Bonnett, president of H3 Consulting, opened the discussion with a few hard facts and figures. One-third of employers believe that employees share a sense of responsibility for controlling drug spending. Mark, a member of the Sanofi Canada advisory board, highlighted the free guide commissioned by the Mental Health Commission of Canada in partnership with OPG’s biometric screening programs. The wellness initiative also had an impact on drug spending, with total drug cost reductions equaling $323,417. Further savings are expected as OPG’s wellness program continues and expands.

The impact of chronic disease is a huge challenge, but by getting employees involved in cost management, adopting new drug plan strategies, partnering with healthcare professionals and promoting well-being, employers can better manage costs—and have healthier employers.

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“Safety is enshrined at OPG: it’s who we are and part of our corporate culture,” said Sott. “However, the emphasis now also includes a health and safety policy that includes the mental and physical well-being of employees.”

A four-pronged employee wellness program implemented in 2010 tackles chronic disease through education; engagement (readiness to make changes, determining risk factors and early diagnosis and treatment); enablement (facilitation of programs, early intervention and screening methods); and empowerment of employees. Between 2010 and 2011, sick days from mental health dropped by 16%, those related to cancer fell 9%, and sick days related to diabetes/metabolic syndrome/obesity increased by 4%, likely because more new diabetics were diagnosed with OPG’s biometric screening programs. The wellness initiative also had an impact on drug spending, with total drug cost reductions equaling $323,417. Further savings are expected as OPG’s wellness program continues and expands.

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