

by MARILYN LEWIS

A Briefcase Full of Prevention

Corporate America is finding that fiscal fitness depends on physical fitness

HEALTH CARE REFORM? If nothing else, the debates have brought agreement in one area, that the cost of widespread comprehensive health care is a big-ticket item. The idea of passing the tab to employers has generated plenty of discussion about the role Corporate America plays in individual health matters.

As the drama is played out, we sought some insight from a man whose name is synonymous with health care reform, Bill Clinton.

THE JOURNAL: *Mr. Clinton, in your opinion, what is the corporation's role in taking responsibility for the health and well-being of its employees?*

CLINTON: *Individuals must take responsibility for their own well-being. It's the individual who controls his or her lifestyle. The employer simply has a responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace. But in creating this, the corporation can make an effort to help employees improve their individual health and fitness. I think that can be done easily, with a tremendous payback to the employer, and it doesn't have to cost a lot of money.*

THE JOURNAL: *Sure, Bill. Every corporation wants healthier employees. That means improved morale, reduced sick time, increased quality and productivity, lower insurance premiums. But you say it doesn't cost a lot of money? Can you prove it?*

illustrations by PHIL BOATWRIGHT

He already has. James W. "Bill" Clinton, vice president of Management Services at Big Three Industries (now known as Air Liquide America Corporation, or ALAC), has watched the growth and development of a corporate wellness program at his company since he helped to implement it several years ago.

Since then, ALAC has learned what a number of other Houston-based companies have come to know: physical fitness can translate to fiscal fitness.

Healthy employees are happier, more productive employees, and the savings generated by a corporate wellness program can easily outweigh the costs.

What is Wellness?

Although the concept of wellness—or maintaining health—isn't new, it is still a virtual stranger to the American workplace. Since the founding of The Methodist Hospital's Sid W. Richardson Institute for Preventive Medicine (IPM) almost two decades ago, wellness programs for the general public have been met with great acceptance. Those programs, including cancer screenings, weight management, nutrition counseling, and smoking cessation, along with other general health screenings, have recently threaded their way into Corporate America.

Corporate wellness began with pre-placement physicals, which many companies do routinely when hiring new employees, and executive check-ups. At many companies they've grown to include overall health screenings, educational seminars, immunization programs, and exercise facilities for all employees.

No longer are these programs considered corporate "frills." And no longer are they exclusively offered to the upper management echelon. As health care costs increasingly impact the company's bottom line, corporate wellness programs can testify that an ounce of prevention is far more valuable, and cheaper, than a pound of cure.

According to Linda Horner, IPM Marketing Specialist for wellness programs, you don't have to be an actuary to figure out the benefits.

"It's not unusual for health screenings to show that 30 percent of a company's employees have elevated cholesterol levels, which makes them candidates for cardiovascular disease," Horner says.

If just one employee normalizes his or her cholesterol levels through diet and/or medication, the employer has potentially saved two things: the major expenses associated with treating potential heart disease, and that employee's life. If you have 200 employees, and 30 percent are at risk, your savings are 60 times that.

At ALAC, Clinton recalls what one doctor told them when they first considered starting the wellness plan. If you discover one employee with a major medical problem in the early, treatable stages of an illness, your program will have paid for itself.

The doctor's statement proved true. Annual wellness expenses for 1,500 employees average \$60,000 to \$80,000, but Clinton claims the program is "basically free." While he can't cite the specific savings since results of health screenings are confidential, he's heard enough second-hand success stories to justify continuation of the program.

"I'm a prime example," Clinton says. "I discovered I had a slight blood pressure problem, and I've learned to control it through diet and medication."

In a nutshell, that's what wellness is about—identifying risk factors, then minimizing the risk. For both employees and the company, that means minimizing the costs of health care. But Clinton sees a bigger picture.

"There are many paybacks that aren't quantifiable," he explains. "The first thing that became apparent when we started the program was improved employee

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morale. Everyone felt good that the company was spending money on them in a caring way.”

Other Houston-based companies have seen similar results.

At the law firm Vinson & Elkins, managing partner Harry M. Reasoner praises the weight-management program that his firm implemented through the IPM.

“It’s proven to be a very effective and inexpensive way for our people to lose weight and to develop healthy eating habits,” Reasoner says. “Unlike the faddish programs hyped on television, this is the real thing.”

Pennzoil employees have had success with the IPM’s stop smoking program.

“Our company went smoke free,” says Dee Moody, RN, Pennzoil’s manager of Medical Services. “IPM developed an eight-session videotaped program for us that’s being implemented now with a significant success rate.” Moody explains that the videotaped approach works well for Pennzoil because the company needed to use the program at multiple sites.

Charles E. Comiskey, president of Houston’s oldest licensed risk management company, sees corporate wellness programs as a coming trend. “It’s a way to reduce health insurance premiums and Worker’s Compensation costs,” he says. “In most companies, the most important asset is the staff. Corporate wellness just makes sense.”

The Wellness Menu

A volunteer team set ALAC’s corporate wellness program into motion four years ago, and it hasn’t required any additional personnel since.

“Part of our quality initiative was looking for ways to improve the value of the company,” Clinton says, “and one of the initiatives that came out of that was the health and wellness group. Because of my personal interest in the topic, I became the group mentor.”

The IPM’s “menu approach” gave ALAC’s wellness group the flexibility of choosing activities that best fit their corporate culture.

“No single template fits every company,” explains Cliff Dacso, MD, the IPM’s



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medical director. “You can’t force-fit everyone into the same program. That’s why we spend so much time designing programs for individual companies. Testing has to be designed for the population you’re serving.”

At ALAC, testing served as the starting point. Health screenings were offered on site and free of charge to all employees, and they included questionnaires, physiological measurements, blood analysis, and the distribution of health education materials.

At first, Clinton recalls, there was some resistance. In one department, every employee refused to participate—a rumor had started that it was some sort of clandestine, big-brother scheme to weed out employees with potential problems.

This, says Clinton, is why you can’t overemphasize the confidentiality factor.

When the IPM conducts health screenings, employees receive their results confidentially, either on the spot or mailed to a home address. The only feedback the employer receives is an aggregate report showing percentages and trends, which helps them determine which health programs would benefit the most employees.

The blood analysis used in ALAC’s health screening provided valuable individual feedback on blood sugar, cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, and triglycerides. The physiological measurements included height, weight, blood pressure, body fat percentage, waist:hip ratio, and flexibility testing. The questionnaire collected data on family history and lifestyles. This information was compiled in a confidential report for each participant, with interpretative comments and recommendations. A group interpretation session was offered to answer questions about risk factors and lifestyle. Since the IPM does not offer direct medical treatment, those who needed it were referred to their individual physicians for follow-up.

After the initial health screening, ALAC implemented educational seminars that focused on behavior modification. They also reinforced the wellness issue by mailing monthly newsletters to employees’ homes.

“We wanted to reach the families,” Clinton says, “and it worked! Even my kids read *Healthlines*.”

Every year since the program began, ALAC reviews the menu and modifies the program to meet employees’ needs. They’ve added company-sponsored sports activities, cancer screenings, and smoking cessation programs, along with education seminars for breast and prostate cancer.

Their biggest struggle now is encouraging participation from employees at remote locations. In the past, Clinton acknowledges, participation suffered when employees had to leave the workplace to take part in screenings. To increase off-site participation, the IPM is writing protocols to be used at off-site health care facilities closer to these employees.

At the IPM’s helm, Dacso ponders the term “corporate wellness.”

“While corporate wellness programs are custom-fitted to different corporations, the real focus is on the individual,” says Dacso. That’s why he dislikes the term “corporate” wellness.

“I am not a doctor who takes care of corporations. I take care of individuals,” says Dacso, who thinks “Employee Wellness” or “Individual Health in the Corporate Environment” are more accurate labels.

Semantics aside, wellness programs have a lot to offer both employee and employer, because the benefits have a trickle-up effect on the company.

Corporate wellness and employee wellness are pretty much one and the same. At least that’s what we hear from Bill Clinton.

For more information on corporate wellness programs, call Methodist’s Institute for Preventive Medicine at (713) 790-3000. ♦