

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING NATUROPATHIC MEDICINE IN THE WORKPLACE: AN INTRODUCTORY REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Husky Injection Molding Systems Inc. employs 1400 people at its Bolton, Ontario, Canada plant. Their wellness team includes a naturopathic doctor, medical doctor, chiropractor, fitness trainer, ergonomist, massage therapist and two nurses. The program includes individual naturopathic, chiropractic and conventional medical health consultations, as well as educational programs, cafeteria management and fitness and ergonomic assessment. Husky is currently developing a study to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of its wellness programs, as detailed in this preliminary report. Also included is a discussion of wellness programs, detailing their evolution and benefits. Wellness programs are gaining in popularity and implementation to help effectively manage employers' escalating health care costs in both Canada and the United States. Aspects discussed include components, implementation and effective measurement parameters.

HISTORY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

From a historical perspective, the first workplace wellness programs were initiated when unions strove to protect the health and safety of their members. With the inception of the industrialized age and all its ensuing health and safety risks, there were competing priorities: investing in the employee and helping them be as effective as possible in their job, versus the cost/benefits of such an investment as perceived by the employer. While initially some employers' values may have encouraged wellness programs, even today the underlying reason for wellness programs is that they are a "good investment" (1).

The precursor of today's wellness programs was the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs); some EAPs identify themselves as "wellness programs." An EAP is a work-based program, sponsored by the employer (or association or collective bargaining unit), which offers employees services that are designed to assist in the identification and resolution of personal problems which are associated with a negative impact on productivity (2).

Wellness programs have taken this further, by addressing health issues and by identifying prevention and education as cost-effective mea-

asures that can benefit both employees and employers. Wellness programs are more comprehensive than EAPs in their approach to the employee and their workplace (3).

EAPs had their start as occupational assistance programs (OAPs) in the 1930s. They were based on the principles of Alcoholic Anonymous. Many were initiated by recovering alcoholic employees who believed that if other alcoholic employees received help early enough, employers could save thousands of dollars in lost productivity (4).

They lost support after World War II and it took the emergence of drug abuse and dependency problems, increasing divorce rates, and the decreasing stigmatization of domestic violence and mental health issues for them to be revitalized in the 1960s. Legislation passed in the 1970s in the United States regarding equal opportunity employment and rehabilitation also encouraged their development (4).

By the 1980s, over 80% of Fortune 500 companies had an EAP plan (2). In the 1990s, the impetus for their growth has been the cost containment of health-related benefits (3).

As with all developing industries, wellness included, the focus has changed and developed with time. In the 1970s, deaths from heart disease, cancer and stroke were on the upswing, health food stores were mushrooming and fitness be-

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came a new mantra for many. Wellness plans emerged, not so much as components of EAPs, but in response to the growing interest in health and fitness in North America. People in general wanted to be healthier, but they were finding it difficult to change their lifestyle (5).

The workplace was identified as the most effective place in which to promote wellness to individuals. The key components of legitimate wellness programs, prevention and education, in practice have not been part of the conventional health care system, and hence have not been well honored in wellness programs (5). Consequently, most wellness programs have focused on two constituents, namely back fitness and stress management. Not until information, awareness, and the need for specialists in these areas were recognized and available, have we seen the development of more comprehensive wellness programs.

The economic environment of the 1990s has provided the most recent impetus for developing wellness programs. Escalating health care costs, increased short and long term disability and rehabilitation claims and increased stress and stress-related illnesses have all influenced employers to seek ways of controlling these costs (6). Employees benefit through improved health and greater job satisfaction (7).

Wellness programs' effectiveness is based on their ability to identify those at health risk, provide education programs for them, and to influence behaviors. Naturopathic doctors, as the medical specialists in prevention and patient education, will be key to developing wellness programs which are integrative and holistic in their approach.

GOALS OF CORPORATE HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The goal of corporate health and wellness programs is to keep employees healthy and productive. To this end, they embrace programs that look at fitness, psychological and emotional health, and the workplace environment. Components of corporate health programs include peak performance, stress hardiness, prevention and well-being.

The top 10 causes of death in the United States are related to lifestyle or personal behavior (7). The Cen-

ter for Disease Control in Atlanta estimates that 90% of all health care dollars in the United States are spent on diseases that could be prevented (8).

What makes corporate health and wellness programs unique in comparison to other workplace initiatives is their focus on education and prevention. True prevention considers health as a process, and intervenes and seeks to reverse negative processes before they cause disease, not after. Businesses suffer if they wait until an employee has a health crisis, both in terms of lost productivity and illness care expenses.

Much like an iceberg, employers only see part of what "makes up" their employees. At any given time, 14 - 20% of employees are struggling with personal and health problems which adversely affect their productivity (2). Wellness is about choice; lifestyle habits are the critical determinant of health and well-being. It is much easier to maintain and enhance health than to rebuild it. Intrinsic to naturopathic philosophy is the concept of doctor as teacher. The naturopathic doctor is ideally positioned to assume the roles of health advocate, facilitator and practitioner.

Naturopathic doctors place the emphasis on patient self-responsibility, teaching about healthy choices, providing the tools to implement these choices and educating their patients as to the implications of their choices.

COMPONENTS OF A WELLNESS PROGRAM

For wellness programs to be successful, there are several essential components. First, they need time, usually three to five years, to allow for optimal implementation, to show effectiveness and to allow employees to learn and retain healthier behaviors. Second, they need a good plan, one which helps the organization achieve its strategic goals. Finally, they must be supported by senior management (2).

As wellness program participation is voluntary, senior corporate executives need to embrace and participate in the wellness program to provide good role models for their employees. Corporate policies must support the programs, including flexible time for employees to attend programs or to work out.

Components necessary to developing a wellness program are a workplace health audit, an employee health audit, a primary health risks determination, a strategic plan and measurement of quantifiable results (8,9).

It is important to survey the workplace to identify areas which are of concern to the employer, including the number of days lost to illness, short and long term disability costs, and patterns of absenteeism and illness. Employees need to be involved to elicit their cooperation and to identify areas of interest. This is paramount to securing employee participation.

Each workplace and its employees form a unique environment for which programs must be developed to address their needs (9). The strategic plan identifies the primary areas of concern, resources required (people, finances and workspace), measurable parameters and the goals of the program. This plan must complement the corporation's goals for it to succeed.

Not all components need to be provided on site or developed independently. Companies can negotiate group rates for employees at fitness centers, purchase pre-packaged programs from wellness providers and hire consultants to manage some or all aspects of their wellness program.

Incentive programs can increase employee participation to levels as high as 80% (5). Normal participation levels run at 15 - 25% (10). Many companies have identified that even with a 15% participation rate, their program is cost-effective (11).

A comprehensive and effective wellness program has many facets, which include:

- fitness (testing, programs, facilities & evaluation)
- screening programs (diabetes, hypertension, etc.)
- risk assessment (individual and corporate)
- educational seminars and health fairs
- healthy learning materials (newsletters, intranet site, bulletin board programs)
- cafeteria management (healthier food choices)
- medical examinations (medical doctor, naturopathic doctor, chiropractor, osteopathic physician)

- healthy heart (prevention and rehabilitation)
- long term disability and rehabilitation case managers
- incentive programs to encourage participation

THE HUSKY WELLNESS PROGRAM: ONE COMPANY'S PLAN

Husky Injection Molding Systems is a world leader in the design and manufacture of plastic injection molding equipment. Founded by President Robert Schad, Husky has also taken the lead in providing a healthy, environmentally sound and aesthetically pleasing workplace for its employees. His workplace philosophy is to achieve corporate goals with excellence, and to this end, Husky provides an optimum working environment and comprehensive wellness and fitness facilities. This focus on wellness enhances performance, motivation and enthusiasm amongst employees. His interest in naturopathic medicine started early as his mother was a homeopath in Germany. He is also past Chair of the Board of Governors of the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine.

Husky has received considerable media attention for their wellness program, which is unique in Canada. Every year since its inception, there have been numerous articles published about Husky's wellness program in national newspapers (12,13) and magazines (14), as well as countless requests for interviews with wellness center practitioners, primarily the naturopathic doctor.

The wellness program at Husky has evolved over the last decade. The program began with one nurse on site to oversee first aid requirements, and included a local family physician who was available as needed. The first naturopathic doctor was hired seven years ago to provide private consultations one day per week for those employees seeking naturopathic health care. Since that time, the wellness program at Husky has grown to include a medical doctor, a naturopathic doctor, a chiropractor, a registered massage therapist, an ergonomist, two registered nurses and a fitness consultant. The program is housed in a dedicated employee services facility which includes a fully equipped health clinic, a fitness center and a daycare center.

The services of the Wellness Center doctors are provided at no charge to employees. Employees are encouraged to visit the clinic during working hours for their health care needs and are not docked for time away from the job. Patient visits may be for acute problems, chronic conditions or for consultation regarding preventive and self-help measures. Offering services onsite is time efficient for employees, provides easy access to information, and increases awareness of health and wellness issues. The Wellness Center staff works cooperatively to provide fully integrated health care. Weekly case conference meetings are held to discuss cases that require input from several disciplines in order to best serve the needs of patients.

A large percentage of employees are seen on a one-to-one basis in the Wellness Center. Paramount to the program's successful integration is that wellness programs extend beyond the clinic and are embraced as part of Husky's corporate culture. Evidence of this is the high level of employee participation in programs which are offered after regular working hours.

The Wellness Center had over 4,500 patient visits in 1996, and the fitness center logged over 20,000. Appointments are tracked by presenting complaint which are then categorized as either a pre-placement physical, Workman's Compensation Board claim (initial claim or ongoing claim), ongoing treatment, health education, counseling, acute illness or injury.

Visits to the naturopathic doctor are comprised primarily of ongoing treatments. Appointments for health education, counseling and acute illness care are also significant. The naturopathic doctor is onsite two days each week, with approximately 70% of her time devoted to patient care; the balance is for program planning and administration. Over 800 Husky employees have consulted the naturopathic doctor in the past three and a half years.

Key features of Husky's wellness program are educational initiatives and a focus on nutrition and exercise. Seminars, lectures and workshops on a wide variety of topics including child safety, stress management and vegetarian cooking, are offered to employees and their families on a regular basis. Newslet-

ters, updates and bulletin board postings provide others sources of information about health and wellness issues. The three Husky cafeterias, as well as the independent daycare center kitchen, offer a wide variety of healthy foods with menu creation overseen by the naturopathic doctor. High fat and processed foods are not available. Vegetarian choices are highlighted and subsidized, and herbal tea is complimentary.

This emphasis on wellness in the workplace makes good business sense. The absenteeism rate at Husky is well below the industry average with only 2.4 days lost per employee per year. The industry average is 9.6 days (15). Husky has calculated that for each day that they are able to reduce their average absenteeism rate, the company saves \$200,000. This reduced absenteeism rate results in a substantial savings.

Based on company reports, the prescription drug costs of \$153.70 per employee (16) are well below other comparable companies' costs of \$495.02 per employee (17), even when factoring in the costs of naturopathic medicines, which the company's benefits package covers. At this time and for the purposes of this preliminary report, the cost for naturopathic medicines has not been tracked separately.

The wellness program is perceived as a tremendous benefit and is considered a factor in the company's ability to attract and retain high caliber employees. Employees report that they appreciate the opportunity to learn about health, wellness and naturopathic medicine. They find the Wellness Center convenient and use the center as a resource for themselves and their families. Even with such interest and the president's support, it has been a challenge to build bridges with employees to attract them to the Wellness Center and to have them decide to use complementary therapies. Both its close proximity to the high traffic employee fitness center and the lending library of health-related books have helped increase its visibility.

The Wellness Center staff are preparing a major study to measure the impact of wellness programs at Husky. While the statistics about overall program costs and usage in the employee population are easily measured, it is more difficult to

measure the intangibles such as enhanced creativity, improved quality of life and the long term costs savings related to disease prevention. These intangible factors are key financial elements which impact every company's profitability. As Denis Burkitt, MD, a British physician who first documented the disease Burkitt's lymphoma, said, "Not everything that counts can be counted" (18).

Husky's experience over the period of the evolution of the wellness program demonstrates that with an investment in wellness, the cost of employee health care decreases. Employees can stay healthy, feel well, reduce health risks and optimize their performance, while the business prospers too.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS

The demand for comprehensive wellness programs in the workplace is increasing rapidly in correlation with the increasing demands on our health care systems. In addition to the creation and implementation of more programs such as Husky's, other cost-effective health measures will develop. Programs such as the following are anticipated to be implemented or to grow in the near future.

Telephone based patient-advocate and patient information systems provide 24-hour information from a health care provider—a trend, note the authors, observed among many businesses today. In that respect, they function much like an EAP, but are related to physical instead of psychological health issues. Their effectiveness is currently being studied by insurance companies to evaluate the best utilization of health care resources.

The authors predict that self-care manuals and materials will be much more important in the future and readily available for employees. Technomation (automated access to information) will allow for cost-effective access to health care information and advice through a variety of means, including the internet, corporate intranets (an internal company dedicated version of the internet), interactive voice mail and fax-on-demand.

Risk rating is one of today's most controversial aspects of health initiatives. One of the most difficult aspects of implementing this type

of a program is running the risk of violating legislation, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, which covers employees with substance abuse problems, or the Canadian Charter of Rights and other human rights legislation (19). Some employee behaviors such as alcoholism or smoking, as well as conditions such as obesity or genetic predisposition to specific conditions may be considered a disability (19). As such, singling these employees out and raising their risk rating may violate these pieces of legislation.

Case managers will become more involved and aggressive in managing long-term disability and rehabilitation cases.

Most importantly, complementary therapies will become more prevalent and accepted in corporate wellness programs, as insurance coverage expands. The basic tenets of naturopathic medicine—disease

prevention, determining the cause of illness and implementing the doctor as teacher—are the very skills that are at the heart of any wellness program. Naturopathic doctors will assume a crucial role, as they become the pre-eminent authorities for developing and managing workplace wellness programs.

As indicated by this preliminary study, corporate wellness programs which include naturopathic medicine are a cost effective vehicle for corporations to consider as a valuable employee benefit.

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EFFECTIVENESS OF WELLNESS PROGRAMS

EAPs have existed long enough for good statistical measurements to be available, which detail that they are cost effective. There have been some wellness programs operative since the early 1970s. Unfortunately, it's difficult to compare wellness programs as they differ widely, ranging from simple healthy back programs to comprehensive onsite managed care facilities. EAP companies may quote statistics that have been developed for more comprehensive wellness programs, and vice versa.

Historically, EAPs show a significant cost effectiveness, with a return on investment of 200 to 600% (20). Wellness programs, due to their more comprehensive programs, tend to show better return on investment (ROI) than EAPs, but generally require longer implementation times.

More specifically:

- Steelcase estimates savings of \$2 million a year, nearly a 6-to-1 return on investment (20).
- Union Pacific, with many older and overweight employees, saves \$1.2 million a year with their wellness program which is specifically geared to high risk employees (21).
- L.L.Bean pays workers up to \$200 for implementing healthy habits, including stopping smoking and attending prenatal classes (22).
- Canada Life Assurance company found that absenteeism in "active" groups was 23.5% lower than for other employees. They calculated a return of \$6.85 for each dollar invested in the program (23).
- Dupont in the United States found that absenteeism was reduced by 14% for those employees who participated in wellness programs (24).
- Superior Coffee and Foods, a subsidiary of Sara Lee Corporation, had long-term disability costs lowered by 40% attributable to a comprehensive wellness program (24). Pillsbury earned a 363% ROI on a fitness program and Motorola earned 300% (23).
- Each dollar Adolph Coors Company invests in their wellness programs yields up to an 855% return (11).

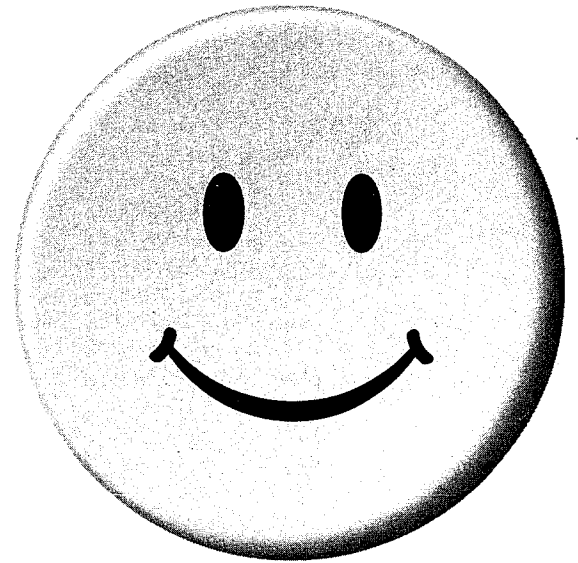
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BIOGRAPHIES

Ruth Anne Baron is a Naturopathic Doctor and graduate of the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine. She is on staff at the Wellness Center at Husky Injection Molding Systems in Bolton, Ontario, and also directs the wellness program for the Toronto Montessori School board. Her private practice is in Toronto at the Lawrence-Yonge Naturopathic Clinic. Dr. Baron has lectured extensively to pharmacists and other professional groups across Canada, and to businesses and health centers throughout the Metropolitan Toronto area. She serves as vice-chair of the board of directors of the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine.

Sheila Campbell is a marketing consultant (focused primarily within the complementary health care field), founding partner of Wellness Productions and Executive Director of the Canadian Academy of Homeopathy. Ms. Campbell has written on business and health issues in local and national publications, including *Health Naturally* and *Alive Magazine*.

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