

Dollars and sense of a healthy workplace

 straitstimes.com/lifestyle/dollars-and-sense-of-a-healthy-workplace

January 21, 2019

My previous stint in a local community hospital left an indelible impression on me.

Unlike major restructured hospitals, which focus on acute care, community hospitals provide intensive inpatient rehabilitation and post-acute care over a typical period of four to six weeks.

Often, the community hospital is where patients start to realise the weight of their healthcare cost.

I've seen too many patients there struggle with the stress of not just a big hospital bill, but also the reality of not having a regular income to fund their living expenses upon their discharge.

A patient's healthcare cost is not just the hospital bill he gets. There is also the cost of his job loss, loan-repayment vulnerability, mortgage woes and long-term medical care, not to mention the stress of juggling all these.

Here is a typical example: A patient with stroke symptoms rushes to a restructured hospital for emergency and acute care treatments. His loved ones then have to deal with difficult decision-making processes and confusion in the intervening days. They heave a sigh of relief when the patient is deemed medically stable to be discharged to a community hospital for intensive rehabilitation.

And that is when the reality of dealing with the cost starts to set in.

The greatest fear among patients is having to burden their loved ones, as well as obstructing their loved ones' career ambitions.

If you multiply one patient's cost by 30,000 - which is the approximate annual local incidences of cancer, heart attack and stroke combined - and include the cost of supporting their dependants, you have a grave national employment and productivity problem. This has been estimated at \$15.65 billion or 3.8 per cent of Singapore's gross domestic product.

To effect a change and make healthcare costs less burdensome for people and the nation, we must focus on preventive health.

GET HEALTHY AT WORK

Companies can and should play a big part in this. It's a win-win situation for them and their employees.

With 70 per cent of the resident population in the workforce, the workplace is an ideal setting to influence health behaviours.

An employee typically spends about 11 hours at work and on the commute to work, leaving only a small portion of his waking hours for other activities.

As he has limited free time for domestic duties, family bonding, meal preparations and personal reflection, he is likely to ignore taking good care of his health.

Yet, health behaviours account for 80 per cent of deaths from non-communicable diseases, according to the World Health Organisation.

Employers are thus increasingly and ethically expected to share the responsibility of protecting and enhancing the health of their employees. This is particularly so, given the sedentary lifestyle risks that work places on staff.

It is why employers should have programmes that help to improve the health of employees and hence, their productivity.



ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO

Such programmes will help staff to better control their chronic diseases and, in the process, lead to lower medical expenses for the companies.

A company's comprehensive risk management process should include these six approaches: on-site health screening, a chronic disease management programme, on-site physical activities, vaccination programmes, a smoking cessation drive and healthy eating initiatives.

Many global companies, including PepsiCo, have reaped considerable savings from maintaining workplace wellness programmes. And most of the savings are a result of reduced absenteeism and a reduction in direct medical costs.

Closer to home, the "Check Car, Check Body" programme by ComfortDelgro and the Health Promotion Board (HPB) helped many drivers

realise that they had at least one chronic condition like hypertension, diabetes or cholesterol issues and to start managing it.

GSK (Singapore), the 2017 Singapore Health Award (Achievement accolade) recipient, also has a chronic disease management programme, where it employed a case-coordinator to help employees manage their chronic diseases.

For a company's workplace wellness programme to succeed, it needs buy-in from its top leaders.

Occasionally, pilot studies might have to be conducted to generate a business case before they commit to it. In any case, one must be relentless in the effort to garner leadership's commitment and sustain that support with periodic data analytics update.

It is also important to not let budgetary commitment hinder the implementation of a workplace health programme.

People tend to attribute the health programme successes of large firms to their relatively large revenues. However, small companies with sustainable business operations can have equally successful health programmes. Big and small companies can tap the HPB for help.

A company can start with any type of health initiative that applies to all employees, be it a vaccination drive or an on-site health-screening programme, for instance. The idea is to initiate conversations and raise awareness on preventive health among staff, thereby generating a momentum leading to discussions on other health initiatives.

Importantly, companies must measure the success of their health programmes. They can consider the following:

- Has it rolled out at least one of the six health initiatives as mentioned earlier?
- What is the participation rate?
- What is the impact on the business? For instance, what is the value on investment or return on investment? How many heart attacks has the company prevented?

Singapore's population is ageing and healthcare cost is projected to rise accordingly.

The same applies in the workplace, with the medical cost of each employee projected to double, from \$946 in 2016 to \$1,973 in 2030.

Employees cannot simply hope for more medical care benefits as the company will incur a higher operating expenditure, which is not sustainable.

The key, then, is for the company to focus on integrating preventive health initiatives into the company's business operations, and for the employees to support such initiatives.

These programmes will only benefit people as they get help with improving their health and managing chronic conditions they may have. Hopefully, this means that fewer people will end up in community hospitals worrying about mounting healthcare expenses and burdening their loved ones.

•Dr Andrew Epaphroditus Tay is a medical doctor who provides occupational health services and strategies in a multinational company.

DocTalk

Dollars and sense of a healthy workplace

Companies that help their staff monitor their health can reap benefits such as productivity and lower medical costs



Andrew Epaphroditus Tay

My previous stint in a local community hospital left an indelible impression on me.

Unlike major restructured hospitals, which focus on acute care, community hospitals provide intensive inpatient rehabilitation and post-acute care over a typical period of four to six weeks.

Often, the community hospital is where patients start to realise the weight of their healthcare cost.

I've seen too many patients there struggle with the stress of not just a big hospital bill, but also the reality of not having a regular income to

fund their living expenses upon their discharge.

A patient's healthcare cost is not just the hospital bill he gets. There is also the cost of his job loss, loan-repayment vulnerability, mortgage woes and long-term medical care, not to mention the stress of juggling all these.

Here is a typical example: A patient with stroke symptoms rushes to a restructured hospital for emergency and acute care treatments. His loved ones then have to deal with difficult decision-making processes and confusion in the intervening days. They heave a sigh of relief when the patient is deemed medically stable to be discharged to a community hospital for intensive rehabilitation.

And that is when the reality of dealing with the cost starts to set in.

The greatest fear among patients is having to burden their loved ones, as well as obstructing their loved ones' career ambitions.

If you multiply one patient's cost by 30,000 – which is the approximate annual local incidences of cancer, heart attack and stroke combined – and include the cost of supporting their dependants, you have a grave national employment and productivity problem. This has been estimated at \$15.65 billion or 3.8 per cent of Singapore's gross domestic product.

To effect a change and make healthcare costs less burdensome

for people and the nation, we must focus on preventive health.

GET HEALTHY AT WORK

Companies can and should play a big part in this. It's a win-win situation for them and their employees.

With 70 per cent of the resident population in the workforce, the workplace is an ideal setting to influence health behaviours.

An employee typically spends about 11 hours at work and on the commute to work, leaving only a small portion of his waking hours for other activities.

As he has limited free time for domestic duties, family bonding, meal preparations and personal reflection, he is likely to ignore taking good care of his health.

Yet, health behaviours account for 80 per cent of deaths from non-communicable diseases, according to the World Health Organisation.

Employers are thus increasingly and ethically expected to share the responsibility of protecting and enhancing the health of their employees. This is particularly so, given the sedentary lifestyle risks that work places on staff.

It is why employers should have programmes that help to improve the health of employees and hence, their productivity.

Such programmes will help staff to better control their chronic diseases and, in the process, lead to



lower medical expenses for the companies.

A company's comprehensive risk management process should include these six approaches: on-site health screening, a chronic disease management programme, on-site physical activities, vaccination programmes, a smoking cessation drive and healthy eating initiatives.

Many global companies, including PepsiCo, have reaped considerable savings from maintaining workplace wellness programmes. And most of the savings are a result of reduced absenteeism and a reduction in direct medical costs.

Closer to home, the "Check Car, Check Body" programme by ComfortDelgro and the Health Promotion Board (HPB) helped many drivers realise that they had at least one chronic condition like hypertension, diabetes or cholesterol issues and to start managing it.

GSK (Singapore), the 2017 Singapore Health Award (Achievement accolade) recipient, also has a chronic disease management programme, where it employed a case-coordinator to help employees manage their chronic diseases.

For a company's workplace wellness programme to succeed, it needs buy-in from its top leaders.

Occasionally, pilot studies might have to be conducted to generate a business case before they commit to it. In any case, one must be relentless in the effort to garner leadership's commitment and sustain that support with periodic data analytics update.

It is also important to not let budgetary commitment hinder the implementation of a workplace health programme.

People tend to attribute the health programme successes of large firms to their relatively large revenues. However, small companies with sustainable

business operations can have equally successful health programmes. Big and small companies can tap the HPB for help.

A company can start with any type of health initiative that applies to all employees, be it a vaccination drive or an on-site health-screening programme, for instance. The idea is to initiate conversations and raise awareness on preventive health among staff, thereby generating a momentum leading to discussions on other health initiatives.

Importantly, companies must measure the success of their health programmes. They can consider the following:

- Has it rolled out at least one of the six health initiatives as mentioned earlier?
- What is the participation rate?
- What is the impact on the business? For instance, what is the value on investment or return on investment? How many heart attacks has the company prevented?

Singapore's population is ageing and healthcare cost is projected to rise accordingly.

The same applies in the workplace, with the medical cost of each employee projected to double, from \$946 in 2016 to \$1,973 in 2030.

Employees cannot simply hope for more medical care benefits as the company will incur a higher operating expenditure, which is not sustainable.

The key, then, is for the company to focus on integrating preventive health initiatives into the company's business operations, and for the employees to support such initiatives.

These programmes will only benefit people as they get help with improving their health and managing chronic conditions they may have. Hopefully, this means that fewer people will end up in community hospitals worrying about mounting healthcare expenses and burdening their loved ones.

drtayk@yahoo.com

• Dr Andrew Epaphroditus Tay is a medical doctor who provides occupational health services and strategies in a multinational company.