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Creating a Heart-Healthy Workplace

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by Patrick J. Skerrett

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If you are like most workers you spend at least 40% of your waking hours on the job. Wouldn't it be great if some of that considerable investment benefited not only your employer and your career, but also your health? You're in luck if your company has a comprehensive wellness program and you take part in it. If it doesn't, a new report from the American Heart Association (AHA) lays out practical ways for companies to support employee wellness through heart friendly efforts. Doing so promises gains — financial and otherwise — for all.

First, lets look at the numbers. Cardiovascular conditions — heart disease, stroke, heart rhythm disorders, peripheral artery disease, heart failure, and others — are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. This year alone they are expected to cost us \$314 billion in direct costs and another \$160 billion in lost productivity. The AHA estimates that up to 30% of medical costs paid by businesses each year are spent on employees with risk factors for cardiovascular disease such as cigarette smoking, excess weight, physical inactivity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes.

Programs that help workers get healthy and stay healthy obviously help the recipients. They're good for business, too, with a return on investment of \$3 to \$15 for every dollar spent on health and wellness, according to Mercedes R. Carnethon, an assistant professor of preventive medicine at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine who chaired the AHA's worksite wellness panel. And they are good for society — there's a trickle-down effect from successful workplace wellness programs that extends to workers' family members and possibly beyond.

Recognizing that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to wellness, the AHA recommends an incremental approach for companies considering starting a wellness program. Such programs should include efforts focused on the following:

- Smoking cessation or prevention
- Increasing physical activity
- Managing and reducing stress
- Promoting healthy eating
- Managing weight (For more on the ROI of weight loss at work, see the Health and Well-Being article, by George L. Blackburn, MD, in our December issue.)
- Educating workers about cardiovascular disease, including how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and how to use an automated external defibrillator
- Structuring the workplace in ways that encourage healthy behaviors and promote occupational health and safety.

The American Heart Association isn't the only organization pushing for cardiovascular disease prevention in the workplace. Healthy People 2010, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' blueprint for health promotion, calls for 75% of all worksites, regardless of size, to develop wellness programs. And the World Heart Federation made "Work with Heart" the theme for this year's World Heart Day. Given that heart disease is easier and cheaper to prevent than to treat, such efforts make sense.

Hundreds of companies already have comprehensive cardiovascular wellness programs, from national giants like General Mills and Visa to smaller worksites like the Ed Schmidt Auto Group in Toledo and RJF Agencies in Minneapolis. If your company doesn't have a program, joining the heart association's Start! program is an easy way to begin.

Does your company offer a wellness program? If so, is it effective? If not, do you wish it did?

Patrick J. Skerrett is editor of the Harvard Heart Letter.

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