



## Screening works well at work

The poor health of employees undermines productivity and profitability, so companies that invest in the wellbeing of their staff can gain a competitive advantage, writes **Dr John Lang.**

**A**S COMPANIES continue to benefit from improved management, HR and OH&S practices, many are now asking, "What next?" Where are productivity and performance improvements going to come from over the next decade(s)?

One thing is certain – employee health will play a large role in any significant productivity push for leading organisations over the coming years.

Evidence continues to mount in relation to the productivity loss associated with poor employee health. Take the following examples.

According to a recent Australian survey, the three most prevalent lifestyle-related risk factors were lack of sleep (60 per cent), inactivity (55 per cent) and overweight/obesity (49 per cent). In fact, the average Australian employee has four risk factors and is gaining weight at more than a gram per person per day (and has done so for the past 20 years).

In addition, employees suffer from various chronic conditions such as neck/back pain (57 per cent), general fatigue (50 per cent – possibly some of those people who are lacking sleep), headaches (45 per cent), allergies/hay fever (31 per cent) and migraines (24 per cent).

### THE COST OF SICKNESS

The total direct cost of lost productivity due to poor health is, according to our own research, about \$28.4 billion a year – and that doesn't even factor in the cost of absence or the replacement cost of employees lost prematurely for health-related reasons. This figure is close to the figure Medibank Private came up with – \$26 billion – in their 2007 report. The lost productivity associated with poor health is the equivalent of three weeks' work per year for every employee in the country. How would your business fare if every employee had three weeks off, in addition to their annual leave and the usual sickies? The bad news is, because we have an ageing workforce, that this will get worse.

### HEALTH-PROMOTION PROGRAMS

Fortunately, progressive companies such as Boral, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, ANZ, Lend Lease and IBM, are doing something about it: providing health assessments and health support to their employees to mitigate the escalating risk associated with unhealthy employees.

A comprehensive health-promotion

program will generally cost between \$100 and \$200 per employee a year. If this sounds a lot, consider the research findings over the past decade that demonstrate conclusively that the benefits (improved productivity, reduced absenteeism, improved morale, lower illness, accident and WorkCover claims) outweigh the costs by an average of five to one. That is, for every dollar invested in the wellbeing of an employee, the return to the organisation averages \$5.

I remember back in the 1980s, when Employee Assistance Programs (EAP's) were just starting to penetrate the Australian corporate psyche. Many stalwarts wailed in disbelief, "You want me to what? You want me to pay for counselling for a stressed employee, or even worse, an employee with a gambling problem or one whose marriage is on the rocks? You've got to be kidding!" Two decades later, no leading organisation would be without an EAP provider. They have become commonplace, and the reason is simple – they work.

We are already beginning to see this with employee health. For many of our corporate clients, employee health is treated as part of an integrated HR strategy to maximise workforce productivity and provide a competitive advantage. For others, it is an 'employer of choice' issue or a tactic to combat the inevitable problems of an ageing workforce, which will come to dominate workforce planning over the next few decades.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The program components vary widely, but at the core of most programs is a face-to-face health assessment that includes, as a minimum, age, gender, blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood glucose, BMI/WHR (body height/weight/fat), smoking, inactivity, stress/anxiety/depression, family/personal history.

Many include several other factors, such as lung function, strength, flexibility, audiometry and vision.

A cheaper alternative is to do an online Health Risk Assessment (HRA). Then there are the follow-up and support programs. Take your pick from health expos, seminars and workshops, activities (yoga, massage, tai chi and the like), online health support, walking programs, workstation assessments, cooking demonstrations, influenza vaccinations, skin checks, books, videos, DVDs, health resource centres, telephonic coaching and various others.

#### WHY SCREENING WORKS

This simple principle (early detection, early intervention) applies to so many risk factors, it is hard for the average person to know what should be checked and when. More importantly, how do you go that step further than early detection – namely, prevention?

This is where workplace screening can be so valuable – prevent first; failing that – detect and refer (to a GP). You would not balk at \$100 to service your photocopier, or \$500 to fix it if it is broken ... and then there is the replacement cost if you do neither, and replacing people is a costly business.

#### OBESITY AND DIABETES – THE LOOMING CRISIS

Some years back, I attended a conference where many of the world's leading obesity researchers presented the latest findings in relation to obesity and weight management. It was a fascinating three days as the academic heavyweights discussed the role of hormones, nutrients and lifestyle factors on body weight.

Many hours and many slides later, the conclusion was reached. I sat in awe as the verdict emerged from this elite gathering: eat less, exercise more. Yep, it is that simple. Yet two-thirds of the Australian population get it wrong.

Weight gain precipitates many other conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, some cancers (colorectal, breast, endometrial), back pain, arthritis, hypertension and, of course, diabetes. In Australia, the prevalence of diabetes has doubled in the past 20 years. Nine out of every 10 diabetics diagnosed are overweight or obese. In fact, if you have a body mass index (BMI) greater than 35, your risk of developing diabetes is 94 times greater than someone with a BMI of 22! This is why it's important to include a blood-glucose test in a routine health check – one in 12 Australians is diabetic, and the prevalence is increasing. One in four Australians is already halfway to being a diabetic – they have a condition known as IGT (Impaired Glucose Tolerance).

Weight gain is the major culprit. Australia is facing a health crisis and companies can no longer afford to sit back and say, "Not our responsibility". It is the responsibility of management to identify and control factors that can undermine productivity, and therefore profitability, and poor employee health does both. ●

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## CASE STUDY SIMON

For some time, Simon has been meaning to book in to see his doctor and have his blood pressure checked. In addition, while he is there, he may as well get his cholesterol checked. Oh, and there is that annoying freckle that seems to have grown a little bigger and darker than it used to be. However, life is busy, so a few more months pass and a few months becomes almost a year. Finally, Simon makes the big effort and his worst fears are realised – it is a melanoma. Fortunately for him, it is cured, but the surgery still leaves a nasty hole in his arm.

Yet for more than 1000 Australians every year, delaying seeing their doctor to check out that skin lesion costs them the ultimate price – their life. Imagine how heartbreaking it would be to lose your life just because you were too busy (or too naive) to get a darkening freckle checked out in time? Melanoma is virtually 100 per cent curable when detected early, and for about 7000 Australians, that is what they manage to do each year. It is a simple progression: early detection, early intervention, better outcome! Would you prefer to be one of the 1000 or the 7000?