



Sound bodies and profits

A healthy balance sheet begins with a healthy staff, writes **Megan Byrne.**



THE problem with the saying “healthy, wealthy and wise” is that it makes all three sound equally attainable; that if you have one, it’s a cinch to get the rest. But the getting of wisdom and the building of wealth are somewhat difficult if you’re lacking in good health.

The 2004-05 National Health Survey revealed that 62 per cent of Australian males and 45 per cent of females are overweight. Other studies have found that the 62 per cent of Australian workers who are overweight or excessively overweight are causing a productivity loss of \$1.7 billion annually: a big hole in anyone’s pocket.

There’s no doubt that healthy profit margins begin with a healthy staff. Savvy employers are encouraging positive choices by providing healthy options for their staff. And we’re not talking free fruit; this is serious stuff: comprehensive



health assessments, counselling programs, weight-loss and anti-smoking coaches, dietitians and masseurs. It all comes under “corporate wellness”. And there are companies to help achieve it.

Good Health Solutions is one such company and it performs more than 100,000 health assessments annually for companies such as ANZ, Boral and Qantas, as well as health, absence and productivity surveys, influenza vaccinations, and yoga, pilates and boxercise classes.

Its managing director John Lang says wellness is not only physical.

“There is also psychosocial and emotional wellbeing, self-efficacy and self-actualisation, resilience, happiness and quality of life,” he says.

“If one of these areas is suffering, a person’s health and ability to perform their job can be seriously affected.”



Dr Lang, who is also the president of the Health and Productivity Institute of Australia, the peak body for corporate wellness providers such as GHS, agrees that unhealthy workers are creating a productivity drain.

“Every risk factor a person has — be it obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, excessive drinking — creates a 2.5 per cent productivity drop,” he says. “The average Australian employee has 4.1 risk factors — that’s a huge productivity drop and a loss of thousands of dollars to the business.”

But increased awareness of health and appropriate lifestyle changes can make a dramatic improvement, Dr Lang advises. “We have found that for every dollar invested in our corporate wellness programs, businesses can see on average four times that amount returned in the form of increased productivity and decreased WorkCover claims.”

Occupational and environmental physician Michael Bloom agrees that improving the overall health of a workforce will pay dividends. But he advises caution in selecting a corporate wellness provider.

“The difficulty is that there are a number of companies claiming to provide health-improvement services, but some of them are 90 per cent

marketing,” he says. “You can conduct millions of tests, but if they are not administered correctly, they can produce no useful results — sometimes even false negatives and false positives. It is far better to look at workplace culture and individual lifestyle, taking work and family history into account, and tailoring tests and advice appropriately.”

Dr Bloom also says it may not be executives who most need the benefits of health checks: “The average blue-collar worker has a poorer diet, has more cigarettes and alcohol, more risk factors and less money. In some ways it would be better for managers to spend their money helping these workers, who might not be able to afford health care on their own. Because really, without the coal-face workers, a company hasn’t got an income.”



Five steps to wellness

Diet: Eat a good mix of fresh fruit and vegetables, lean meats and protein, and aim to drink at least two litres of water a day.

Exercise: Choose activities you enjoy — going for a walk or a bike ride, joining a group fitness class, or taking up a social sport like netball or soccer. Aim for at least 30 minutes three times a week.

Social activities: It is important not to neglect family and friends outside of work. Humans are naturally social beings and, as they say, laughter is the best medicine. So get out, get happy and get healthy!

Me time: Never underestimate the importance of time for yourself. Whether it’s pursuing a hobby, meditating or reading a book, it is important to meet your own needs and allow your body and mind to unwind.

Talk about it: If you are experiencing difficulty coping with aspects of your life — physically, psychologically or emotionally — it’s worth talking to someone about it. The simple act of sharing your feelings with someone unrelated to the issue can often make a world of difference.