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Cancer In the Crosshairs

More HR organizations are taking up the battle against cancer in the workplace, piecing together an increasing number of programs to help employees deal with the disease.

By Carol Patton

Tuesday, March 31, 2015



Several years ago, Mary Bradley, director of health-plan strategy at the Pitney Bowes offices in Shelton, Conn., was speaking at a conference about the challenges employers face regarding employees with cancer. As she spoke, she captured the attention of Terry Langbaum, chief administrative officer at Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center in Baltimore.

At the time, Langbaum and her colleagues were in the throes of creating a web-based program called Managing Cancer at Work. After the session, she asked Bradley to consider piloting the program for roughly six months.

Bradley was intrigued. Every year, roughly 1.5 percent of Pitney's 10,500 U.S. employees are diagnosed with some form of cancer. She says the disease is responsible for the company's highest medical and pharmacy spend, claiming approximately \$9 million in 2013.

Last October, the Stamford, Conn.-based global technology company launched the program. Within the first few weeks, the website had thousands of hits.

"There's a significant gap in resources that exists today," says Bradley, adding that well-educated patients experience much better outcomes than those who lack knowledge about the disease. "We're trying to empower employees to first understand what's best to do in terms of their treatment and then best manage and normalize their lives while undergoing treatment."

As the country's No. 2 killer disease, after heart disease, cancer will claim the lives of 589,430 people this year, or about 1,620 people each day, according to the American Cancer Society. The disease accounts for nearly one of every four deaths in the United States.

The economic costs are just as alarming. In 2011, cancer's direct medical costs in the United States soared to \$88.7 billion, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, based in Rockville, Md. Half of this amount reflected hospital outpatient or office-based-provider visits, inpatient hospital stays accounted for 35 percent and prescription medications were responsible for 11 percent.

Because cancer affects so many people in so many ways, some HR professionals are tackling the disease head-on. They have designed and integrated special policies and programs to help employees -- either diagnosed with cancer or who care for a loved one with the disease -- better understand and manage the illness. Some have introduced second-opinion programs and bone-marrow-registry drives, and have developed amazing research technology that searches for the best treatment plan. In the end, employees with access to such services and programs usually have better healthcare experiences that lead them back to their jobs, and often return very appreciative, productive and loyal.

Show and Tell

Unfortunately, many employees don't consider health plans as trusted resources, says Bradley. Sometimes, their overall care is mismanaged or their treatment is not as complete as it could be, forcing some patients to search online for information.

The Kimmel Cancer Center's Managing Cancer at Work program provides employees with comprehensive information about cancer prevention, early detection and recommended cancer screenings based on factors such as their gender and family history, says Langbaum. For those diagnosed with cancer, the website describes what they can expect from a diagnostic workup, as well as various tests and treatments. It also discusses what staging means -- in which a cancer is located, if or where it has spread, and if it is affecting the functions of other organs -- and offers tips on how to continue working, if desired. Another section targets managers, helping them cope with staff with cancer.

What's unusual about the website is that it features videos of real cancer patients and caregivers sharing their experiences. Employees can also email or call a cancer nurse navigator to help guide them through the practical, physical and emotional side effects of the disease.

"My goal is to connect employees with these experts," says Bradley. "The praise and 'thank you's' we've already gotten

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from employees who have connected with the nurse navigator are wonderful."

The program was promoted via Pitney's CHRO, Johnna Torson, who sent an email to employees and a letter to their homes, Bradley says. Emails were also sent to the managers of approximately 4,000 employees who didn't have access to workplace computers, requesting managers to inform their staffs about the program.

In addition to the website, Bradley says, the company also offers financial planners who can help employees manage debt or structure budgets and legal assistance for terminally-ill workers. Five years ago, it introduced a critical-illness insurance plan that offers an initial \$10,000 payout with a recurring \$500 benefit.

With so many cancer programs and services, HR's key challenge is program coordination and integration, says Brenna Shebel, director of healthcare cost and delivery at the National Business Group on Health in Washington.

Shebel spent several years developing the NBGH's employer portal, called Cancer Continuum of Care, Employer Strategies for Managing the Modern Disease. Employers can download free communication resources that target five employee populations: individuals interested in reducing their cancer risk through prevention, those recently diagnosed with cancer, people in active treatment, those entering into post-treatment and caregivers.

"We're starting to see employers take a lot of interest in how programs are coordinated, integrated and work together to really serve that individual with cancer," Shebel says. "A majority of employers are monitoring what is being adopted in their industry . . . and how they're playing out . . ."

But HR will really commit an "injustice," she says, if its programs don't speak to each other, forcing employees to individually research them on their own. By helping employees with cancer understand how to use these programs and their benefits efficiently, she says, employers will see great outcomes involving healthcare costs, productivity and employee retention.

Global Searches to On-Site Screenings

Last year, SAP launched COPE (Corporate Oncology Program for Employees), which provides its 74,000 employees with a treatment map to help their physicians in the event they are diagnosed with cancer, says Natalie Lotzmann, vice president of HR, chief medical officer and head of global health management at the global software company based in Walldorf, Germany.

Lotzmann says tumor-biopsy samples of employees with cancer are genetically sequenced to identify their specific type of cancer. The genesis of this approach was the company's realization that HANA -- its high-speed, in-memory data platform used by businesses worldwide to process massive amounts of data in minutes or sometimes seconds -- could serve a dual role. The tool is now being piloted in the United States and Germany to conduct global searches for people who have been diagnosed with the same type of cancer as employees, based on those genetically sequenced samples. It then searches world data for the most successful treatments that have been tried for that cancer.

"This is a true innovation," Lotzmann says. "This treatment map is a decision-supporting tool [that] gives you an exact ranking for your personal tumor profile and what is the most likely, expected match for this individual type of cancer."

The company pays for the analysis of two tissue samples and second opinions. Plans are under way to expand HANA's reach beyond the United States and Germany into more countries this year, which have yet to be determined. Lotzmann says the process requires a phased HR approach due to country idiosyncrasies involving logistics and privacy and data-protection regulations.

What caught HR by surprise, she says, was the "tremendous echo" or positive feedback throughout the workforce regarding this new approach.

An estimated 20 percent of the company's workforce diagnosed with cancer are also taking advantage of Health Advocate, a patient-advocacy and assistance company that offers a concierge service to help them access resources, coordinate specialist visits and more, adds Gretta Flynn, North America benefits manager at the technology company's facility in Newtown Square, Pa.

Still, what amazes Flynn is the lack of employees who sign up for an important company benefit -- free, preventive screenings.

"It is very surprising to me the low numbers [of employees who] obtain screenings, especially in a very highly paid, educated workforce," she says.

One reason may be fear or anxiety. Waiting for test results can be stressful. But CBS, the New York-based mass-media corporation, has found a way around it.

The company sponsors mammography days for its offices throughout the country. Some of its 15,000 workers go to nearby radiology centers for breast ultrasounds and receive test results that same day, says Michelle Martin, vice president of HR specialty services at CBS.

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terminally-ill family member.

"It's not all about the dollars we're saving," says Martin, adding that catching any form of cancer in its early stages is typically less costly to treat. "Our view is we want to do what we can to keep our employees healthy, happy and productive."

Affordable and Connected

As employees age, their risks for developing cancer increase, even if no one in their family has the disease, according to the National Cancer Institute, also based in Rockville, Md.

At Delta Airlines, the average age of its employees is 49.

"Cancer is always No. 1 or 2 in terms of [healthcare] costs," says Lynn Zonakis, managing director of health strategy and resources at Delta Airlines in Atlanta.

The company offers a wide variety of benefits, ranging from cancer-screening tests to dedicated oncology nurses who serve on a care-management team, she says. Employees can also seek care via Centers of Excellence, a network of hospitals that are part of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network and include top cancer hospitals such as Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The company pays for employee travel to these facilities, lodging and all other costs after the deductible for treatment or second opinions is met.

Still, Zonakis wanted to do more. HR set an annual, out-of-pocket limit at \$1,250 so employees could afford high-priced drugs. It also encouraged more flexible leave scheduling so employees with cancer and their co-workers could stay more connected to each other and the workplace. Beyond work, Zonakis says, she hears stories about how co-workers prepare meals for sick employees and their families. One employee who sewed quilts as a hobby was even brought quilt patches to sew while recovering.

Zonakis says HR's biggest challenge is keeping all of these programs and services in the forefront of employees' minds.

"Keep things as simple as possible," she says, adding that employees with cancer only need to call one phone number for assistance. "We haven't chosen to worry about the financial impact because we know it's the right thing to do from a clinical-management approach and from a people approach."

HR needs to also develop a training program for managers and supervisors on how to interact with employees who have cancer.

Carol Sladek, partner and work/life consulting leader at Aon Hewitt in Lincolnshire, Ill., says such a program should familiarize these individuals with the company's internal and external resources and privacy laws, offer tips for supporting employees throughout their illness -- such as donating vacation or paid-time-off to an employee's sick bank - - and address key employee questions, such as, "Is my job secure?"

"Some employers don't dive into this piece . . . or put a lot of energy into this," Sladek says. "They don't want to get involved in privacy concerns, but there's so much more that can be done with work/life programs. A lot of the same programmatic elements of work/life programs can really help employees in this situation."

By all accounts, say experts, modifying or creating workplace programs to address cancer sends a powerful message from HR professionals to employees struggling with the disease: "We'll help you manage it, fight it and survive it."

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