

Press Release - 02/22/08

First Choice Health is helping employers promote health & wellness by providing resources for enhanced patient partnerships with physicians

By Ze'ev Young, MD

Many organizations, commercial and non-profit alike, have now reached the point where they understand that proactively devoting resources to keep employees healthy is a wise business strategy. This view contrasts with the more reactive approach of primarily focusing on illness and injury. The paradigm shift has resulted in new employer-supported programs and initiatives for a large number of employees, many of whom are your patients. These new programs have the potential to enhance the health and well-being of your patients, and thus enrich their quality of life.

During the past 15-20 years, employers have watched the exponential growth of health insurance, workers' comp and other health-related costs, and finally found themselves asking, "When is someone going to get control of this?" They've now looked in the mirror and have found there a significant portion of their answer. Employers have discovered that they are in a position to help their employees enhance their health and thereby consume fewer health care dollars. Employees themselves are also beginning to see the light. As employers are beginning to incent employees to adopt healthier lifestyles, employees are becoming financially motivated to act in their own best and healthy interests.

Here at First Choice Health (and in fairness we're not alone in this), we have given considerable thought about ways to promote health and wellness. Together with employers and physicians in the Pacific Northwest, we are actively helping enrollees engage in proactively optimizing their own health (rather than just reacting to illness). An expanded scope of Health & Wellness offerings and collaborative participation in community initiatives characterize our commitment to enhance the health of our region. I would like to share some examples of health and wellness programs and other initiatives that are being promoted by First Choice Health:

- Leading-edge personal **Health Coaching Programs** are now available to assist people across the spectrum of health, from those who are currently healthy to those who are chronically ill. These programs, which are generally linked to personalized **Health Risk Assessments**, help patients develop insights on how they can optimize their health through exercise, nutrition, weight reduction, stress management, smoking cessation, and evidence-based approaches to managing their chronic conditions. These types of

programs are designed to engage patients as more accountable partners in their own health, and are intended to complement your work and that of the other health care practitioners in our 43,500 member provider network.

- **Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** are now available to employers to assist patients and their families through life's stresses and challenges. These stresses are innumerable and range from small to significant. The point is that an employee distracted by problems with a child or spouse is just that: a distracted employee, and one who is less productive and more likely to fall victim to illness or accident. Employers now recognize that it is clearly better to provide professional assistance to help employees through such difficulties, than to experience the adverse cost impact of the unproductive distracted or ill employee.
- Closely aligned and integrated with the EAP are a broad range of **Behavioral Health services**. The value of optimizing one's mental health has fortunately become more universally accepted, leading to greater benefit parity and enhanced employee access to these services. Research shows that the adverse impact of unmanaged mental health issues in the home and workplace is significant, and thus in need of adequate attention. To more effectively meet the behavioral health needs of our clients, we have integrated **Licensed Mental Health Counselors** into our Medical Management programs
- To insure widespread physician and consumer access to the benefits of electronic technology tools, we have recently announced the third consecutive year of grants to physician practices to fund **electronic medical records** and other health information technology innovation. This community-based program is coordinated through the **Washington Health Information Collaborative**. The grant program is designed to enhance our community's health and wellness through improved evidence-based preventive and chronic illness care, enabled by electronic tracking and reminders. Together with the Washington State Health Care Authority, First Choice Health has distributed \$1 million in 2007 to more than 50 awardees, mainly to small and rural physician practices. The Puget Sound Health Alliance and Qualis Health also provide valuable consultative and administrative support to this project. Grant Sponsorship information is available at www.WaHealthInfoCollaborative.org.
- We are also actively engaged in the leadership of the **Puget Sound Health Alliance** to develop consumer decision-support tools to assist employees in adopting behaviors and accessing resources to optimize their own health and well-being. Many key employer organizations, provider groups, health plans, and consumer groups participate in advancing health and wellness via the Puget Sound Health Alliance. It is anticipated that the collaborative work of the Alliance will promote best health practices that will be applicable to consumers across the State.

We know that the personalized physician-patient relationship is at the very core of health and wellness for employees. Physicians provide a key "medical home" for their patients. Our client's employer-sponsored wellness programs and our involvement in community-based initiatives are designed to complement and support the irreplaceable work being done by our region's practitioners. Collaboratively providing services and resources that enhance the health of consumers leads to more productive employees – and, incidentally, more successful employers. We encourage physicians to ask their patients whether they are eligible

for employer-sponsored health and wellness programs, as they can prove to be extremely valuable. Additionally, links to resources available through the Washington Health Information Collaborative and the Puget Sound Health Alliance can be accessed via the First Choice Health website www.fchn.com.

Dr. Young is a practicing physician and Chief Medical Officer of First Choice Health. First Choice Health (www.fchn.com) is a regionally-based hospital- and physician-owned company that provides health care services to more than one million members in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington state. The company emphasizes quality health care, public service and bringing technology to benefit health care practitioners and patients. Dr. Young can be reached at (206) 268-2430.
