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How a proactive approach to health care data can improve worker well-being

By Jaja Okigwe | November 26, 2018 at 10:15 AM

Small-scale, practical uses of data that can improve individual patients' well-being and support healthier workforces more broadly.

Data can help identify countless risk factors and warning signs, reduce patient readmission and lower costs and stress for patients, employers and providers alike.
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We hear a lot about how "big data" is changing the world these days, whether it's in conversations about sports, political campaigns social media or business.

In the world of health care, we often hear about data in relation to the prevention of infections, improving clinical outcomes, medical fraud detection, or the prevention of large-scale data breaches. Sure, an enormous trove of data can lead to interesting statistics, systemic improvements and big picture conclusions, yet more data doesn't always lead to better outcomes for individuals.

What too often goes unmentioned are the small-scale, practical uses of data that can improve individual patients' well-being and support healthier workforces more broadly. Health care data tells a story, and when one employee's story is combined with the stories of others— the medications prescribed, the types of doctors they see, their exercise habits—individual data becomes more intelligent and relevant.

Predictive care to avoid larger issues

One of the clearest examples of how smart, practical data can help in health care is with predictive care. Data can help identi-fy countless risk factors and warning signs, reduce patient readmission and lower costs and stress for patients, employers and providers alike.

Predictive modeling can also help identify whether someone is at risk of abusing addictive or dangerous substances such as opioids. At my company, we've worked to develop an "Opioid Prescribing Metrics" program guided by the Bree Collaborative that helps employers determine if they have an opioid problem among their staff, and how they can deal with it in a delicate and private manner.

This is an engaged, proactive approach that looks at data points such as the volume and timeline of the prescription for opioids. It is far too common today for people to be over-prescribed from the beginning, with many prescriptions written for more than 30 days even though most prescriptions should be capped at 3 to 7 days, unless dealing with extremely severe conditions.

We focus on a set of opioid prescribing measures that help determine the "state of state" of the employee group (subscribers and dependents) to recommend concrete ways to help, including working directly with providers to reach at-risk patients, confidentially supporting people who self-identify with counseling and referrals to programs that can help, and more. These efforts are then implemented through a customized employee assistance program (EAP) that engages employees and respects their privacy.

This approach can be applied to a variety of other health issues, whether that means identifying risks for employees who qualify as obese or who are regular smokers, or helping diabetic employees navigate the current high cost of insulin.

Monitoring health to maintain and improve well-being

Many health care organizations are innovating when it comes to data gleaned from the tracking and monitoring of patients, whether it's through medical apps on smartphones, fitness wearables, or finding new ways to manage medication adherence or chronic diseases.

This ties into the predictive aspect; monitoring things like heart rate, blood pressure, sleep habits and glucose levels using technology or the "Internet of things" can help identify potential red flags and more importantly what actions should be taken far in advance of an actual health crisis.

Outside of a healthier lifestyle, monitoring of employees' health can also be connected to other types of rewards. Wellness incentive programs inspire employees to stick to their wellness regimen, which can be tracked by a variety of milestones, such as the completion of preventive screenings, webinars, informational courses, smoking cessation programs or a simple annual physical.

Support during major life events

There are plenty of life events that can be daunting, stressful or downright life-changing: intensive surgeries, long-term diseases and maternity are some notable examples. There can be a never-ending line of questions to issues like these from employees-–What happens at work if my surgery requires another surgery? How will this disease affect the way my mind processes information? What kinds of benefits do we receive related to adoption? The list goes on.

So how can data be used to address these situations? A simple, first step is to give employees more informational tools that are easy to access and comprehend, such as FAQs on maternity leave or one-pagers on chronic diseases and risk factors. Many of these questions being asked are also inevitably the same asked by similar people at similar organizations going through similar phases.

Health care too often fails at engaging with people, and we don't think enough about people's lives as engageable moments, particularly ones where the individual feels the most confused or alone. Let's open up the health care system to a flood of smart and practical data flowing from providers to the employers to their employees, so our health system can truly work for each and every individual.

Jaja Okigwe is CEO of First Choice Health (www.fchn.com). He started at the company in April 2018 after leading innovation for Premera. He's in the process of redefining the future of healthcare by identifying new, creative solutions for employers.