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## Workplace Wellness

### Tackling tobacco use, weight loss, nutrition and stress management on the job is good for everyone's bottom line.

Janet Rae-Dupree

Struggling to work full time, care for her critically ill husband and contend with her own health issues, Valencia Reeves-McMillan doubted she could add one more thing to her already overloaded life. But when her employer, a large manufacturing company, offered in September 2009 to pay her way through an intensive wellness program at Cleveland Clinic, she signed on. She hoped it might give her tips that would help her husband, as well as herself.

"I didn't have a set goal," says Ms. Reeves-McMillan, 56, who works for Cleveland-based Parker-Hannifin Corp. "I qualified [for the program] because I had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and I was overweight. And I was definitely stressed. I just knew I had to get my numbers in check and get off as much medication as possible."

Two weeks after she started Cleveland Clinic's Lifestyle 180 program, her husband of 26 years died of heart failure and Alzheimer's disease. No one would have faulted her for dropping out of the program. Instead, Ms. Reeves-McMillan intensified her efforts to become a healthier person. Previously a stress eater — "the minute I get out of the house, whatever's in front of me, I'm eating" — she became aware of what fuels her body. She began practicing yoga and listening to stress-relief audio recordings. Her cholesterol levels and blood pressure dropped. She lost 10 pounds in the first six weeks of the program and shaved off 10 more pounds over the next two holiday-packed months.

"I know that if I had the tenacity to take care of my husband for five years, I can do the same for me," she says.

That's exactly the mindset that companies want to encourage in an age of soaring healthcare costs. Corporate America is hopeful that, by offering an expanding smorgasbord of wellness programs to employees, chronic disease costs can be brought under control. Statistics gathered over the past decade indicate that wellness efforts can be fruitful (see "Fiscal Sense").

“America has a serious economic problem . . . due to the cost of healthcare,” explains Dee Edington, Director of the Health Management Research Center at the University of Michigan and author of the book *Zero Trends: Health as a Serious Economic Strategy* (University of Michigan, 2009). “That’s because we wait for people to get sick. An alternative approach, the one that we’re advocating, is help the healthy people stay healthy. That lowers cost, increases productivity and that’s good for our economy and for American business.”

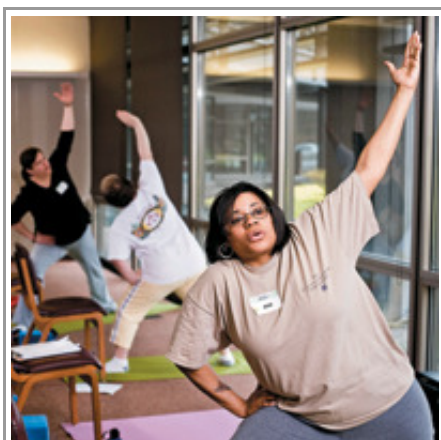
Cleveland Clinic President and CEO Delos “Toby” Cosgrove, MD, says addressing wellness is a critical component of controlling healthcare costs.

“Without controlling obesity, and without controlling smoking, and without dealing with wellness, it’s going to be very difficult for us to ever control the cost of healthcare in the United States,” he said during a speech about healthcare reform last November.

Even if proposed federal legislation doesn’t target wellness specifically, a growing number of companies across the country are realizing the benefits of helping workers become and remain healthy. It’s almost as if wellness is becoming contagious. According to a 2009 survey of 500 midsize and large U.S. companies by professional services firm Towers Perrin, half said they introduced or increased investments in wellness and health promotion in 2009 or will do so in 2010.



Lifestyle 180 participant Lynn Gross continues to take steps toward better health.



From yoga and fitness to quitting smoking, Lifestyle 180 and other programs put people in a position to control their own wellness.

Employer programs range widely from simple communication efforts, such as in-house newsletters or promotional bulletin boards, to full-blown smoking cessation treatments and free gym memberships. Many employers spend millions of dollars to conduct health risk assessments designed to match employees with the programs of greatest benefit to them.

That’s how Cleveland Clinic started its employee wellness effort in 2005, says Michael Roizen, MD, Chairman of Cleveland Clinic’s Wellness Institute.

“We incentivized people to take the health risk assessment and then we incentivized them to go into programs to address any issues that the assessment found,” he says. “But we spent \$4 million on that, roughly \$100 per person, and we found we were only speaking to the already healthy. We’re a very outcome-driven institution. So instead, we decided to focus on what we call the Big Four — tobacco, weight loss, nutrition/portion control and stress management.”

With their employee healthcare costs at about half the national average when the Wellness Institute was formed in 2008, Cleveland Clinic already had won praise for showing how costs could be controlled. Within two years of the Institute’s creation, while healthcare costs everywhere else were on the rise, employee healthcare costs had dropped 8 percentage points,

to 42 percent of the national average.

## Do-Over on a Grand Scale

The lesson plan, Dr. Roizen insists, must center on wellness.

“We want to let people know how easy it is to get a do-over, and how much control they have over their healthcare and their quality of life,” he says.

Numerous studies over the last few decades collectively have concluded that three-fourths of all chronic diseases are caused by poor lifestyle choices within Dr. Roizen’s Big Four. “We wanted to promote methods for avoiding and reversing chronic disease to help our own employees and to help the companies we serve drive down their healthcare costs. That makes the communities we serve more competitive for jobs, too.”

So far, roughly 11,000 of the clinic’s 40,000 employees have taken part in wellness initiatives. Although the effort is not strictly about weight loss, wellness managers like to point out that participants lost a total of 144,000 pounds in 2009. Five thousand participants in the clinic’s Shape Up and Go event collectively walked around the Earth 95 times in 2009, taking some 4.8 billion pedometer-measured steps, or enough to make five trips to the moon.

“Next up: Mars!” jokes David Pauer, a wellness manager in the Employee Wellness Department. “One employee lost 30 pounds in 18 months and the only change he made was to start taking the stairs instead of using the elevators. He works in a five-story building and was making four or five trips a day, but said he didn’t have time to go to a gym, so this was the only commitment he could squeeze into his day.”

During the initial six weeks of the Lifestyle 180 program, the first 12 Parker-Hannifin participants lost an average of 8.8 pounds, trimmed 2.7 inches off the waistline, dropped 1.5 from their body-mass index and decreased their total cholesterol by 25.6 milligrams. More important, notes Parker-Hannifin Health and Welfare Plans Manager Jan Albert, one participant was able to cut the dosage of a blood pressure prescription in half while another managed to avoid taking cholesterol medication.

“These types of programs have implications to ultimately lower costs and improve productivity — a win/win for both Parker and our employees,” Ms. Albert says.

Safeway CEO and President Steven Burd, founder of the Coalition to Advance Health Care Reform, told attendees at the April 2009 World Health Care Congress that 75 percent of his company’s 200,000 employees participate in at least one of Safeway’s myriad wellness initiatives.

“If we can reduce our healthcare costs by 10 percent every year,” he said, “after three years, that’s \$300 million back to the bottom line.”



Cleveland Clinic Executive Chef Jim Perko offers nutrition and cooking tips to program participants.

Safeway employees who take a health risk assessment and then work to reduce their individual risks have a portion of their healthcare insurance premiums refunded to them at the end of the year, he said. Initially, the company offered discounted fitness center memberships, 24-hour nurse hotline services and personal health coaching only to employees. But it expanded that in 2009 to include spouses and, in 2010, all dependents of company employees. The idea, Mr. Burd said, has been to create an overall healthy lifestyle environment around its employees while driving cost reductions to the bottom line. Cleveland Clinic's wellness programs have expanded as well (see "[Transforming a Community](#)").

"As we improve the health of our employees, they become more productive and, as a side benefit, we and they get lower costs," he said. "Everybody wins."

## Clear the Air

Employers new to the wellness craze should take one crucial first step, experts advise: End employee smoking and offer free or subsidized tobacco treatment services. In those 39 states where it is legal, employers can refuse to hire smokers (many employers check for nicotine levels at the same time they're doing new-employee drug tests). Where that's not legal, employers can ban smoking anywhere in or near the workplace.

It's one of the first steps Cleveland Clinic took as it began its employee wellness efforts.

"We are a healthcare facility, and we should stand for the principles of being a healthcare facility," explains [Iyaad Hasan](#), Director of Cleveland Clinic's [Tobacco Treatment Center](#). "We're not trying to stigmatize the smokers, but we also don't want the health of the 80 percent of the population who are nonsmokers impacted by their smoking."

Nicotine addiction, he says, should be covered by health insurance in the same way that treatment for alcoholism and drug addiction is covered. Using medications to help with withdrawal symptoms, and proven therapies to keep smokers permanently nicotine-free, the Tobacco Treatment Center has recorded a 42 percent one-year success rate. The national average for smoking cessation programs is less than 25 percent.

"It increases productivity because workers aren't disappearing for a 10-minute smoke break all the time, it cuts down sick days because nonsmokers have far fewer chronic illnesses, and it improves concentration because it eliminates the distraction of dependency," Mr. Hasan says.



Lifestyle 180 participant

The other three of Dr. Roizen's Big Four can be addressed with concentrated lifestyle changes, says Lifestyle 180 Medical Director [Elizabeth Ricanati, MD](#).

"We aim at treating and reversing chronic disease to bring down the cost of healthcare overall," she says, noting that one-third of participants are able to reduce or eliminate at least one medication for a chronic condition after just 10 weeks in the program. "If we can get them feeling better, they're more likely to sustain behavioral changes over the long term. And the bottom line on that? They're going to do their jobs better."



Valencia Reeves-McMillan embraces the flavors and smells of healthy cooking in her home kitchen.

She calls the program's roughly \$2,500 cost per participant (which Cleveland Clinic covers for employees) extremely reasonable considering the long-term cost of chronic disease management.

"This is an easy way and relatively inexpensive way to reverse the ramp-up in healthcare costs nationally," Dr. Ricanati adds. "What's really neat about this program is the multiplier effect. Family members are seeing health benefits in themselves as a result of living with a participant."

Rosemarie Maki, a Cleveland Clinic homecare physical therapist who joined the program last August, said her husband lost 10 pounds as she made adjustments that resulted in her own 23-pound loss.

"I know I'm a better employee, and I'm better at managing my time and my life," she says. "And I've been able to pass on what I've learned to the patients I see in their homes."

## Never-Ending Changes

Key to long-term success, says Dr. Ricanati, is creating permanent changes in habits that can be sustained for a lifetime. Losing weight too quickly or ramping up an exercise program too intensely inevitably creates a short-term "when this is over" mindset that practically guarantees long-term failure.

After a full year of carefully measured lifestyle changes, Parker employee Lynn Gross, 49, says she is confident she has beaten obesity and, possibly, diabetes. Blood work shortly before she started the program showed that she had a pre-diabetic condition that could easily, with her family history of diabetes, convert into full-blown illness.

A few years previously, Gross says, she had lost a lot of weight and thought she had made sufficient changes in her life to keep it off permanently. But a breast cancer diagnosis knocked her for a loop. Ultimately, she beat the cancer but not the weight gain.

"I decided I would never lose weight again without keeping it off. But I was so afraid to commit. With that mindset, there's no turning back," she says. She spoke with her mother while wrestling with the decision about whether to enroll in Parker's wellness program. "I was hesitant, but she said, 'Look what your dad goes through every day with diabetes. What are you waiting for?'"

Now, a year later, Gross has lost 35 pounds, no longer needs to use a sleep apnea machine and appears to have turned back the clock on the diabetes countdown. After stumbling through the holidays — 10 pounds crept back on — she quickly managed to get back to her healthier routines and lost 7 of the regained pounds. She's now looking forward to a new second-year follow-up Lifestyle 180 program with monthly three-hour sessions.



In a serene environment on a Cleveland Clinic satellite campus, Lifestyle 180 participants learn not only to maintain fitness but also to manage stress — another factor in heart disease and other conditions.

Ms. Reeves-McMillan says she, too, is feeling a bit better each day. “Going up and down steps, I used to just pant. Now it doesn’t bother me at all,” she says. “I get up in the morning and a couple hours later I realize my feet aren’t hurting. That is a big deal.”

And she sees even more clearly now why her employer would want to help her be healthier. “We work harder, we take fewer sick days, our insurance rates go down. It just makes sense,” she says. “It helps the company and it helps me. We’re better workers. And we’re a whole lot happier.”

## Fiscal Sense

Lifestyle choices — smoking, nutrition, weight, physical activity and stress management techniques — account for 40 percent of an individual’s health status, according to a 2007 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Up to 87.5 percent of all healthcare insurance costs can be accounted for by looking at individual lifestyle choices, according to a 2006 study from Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

For each dollar spent on health promotion programs, employers receive a return on investment of roughly \$3.50, according to scores of studies, with numbers ranging from \$1.49 to \$13 for each dollar invested.

For example, 2,596 workers at a manufacturing company who participated in a wellness program chalked up far fewer sick and disability days than those who did not participate. As a result, the company recorded a return on investment of \$2.30 for every dollar spent on promoting wellness, according to a 2002 article in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

In a 2009 article published in the same journal, researchers looked for changes in metabolic syndrome risks in 3,270 manufacturing employees. Those who reduced their health risks the most over the three-year study period — for instance, by reducing hypertension, cholesterol and blood glucose levels — saw an average decrease in healthcare costs of \$437 per year. Those who instead increased their risk rankings cost the company \$1,348 more per year.

## Transforming a Community

When wellness works, it’s hard to stop with employees. That’s why Cleveland Clinic now allows all of its workers’ dependents to take advantage of subsidized weight loss programs, tobacco treatment and gym memberships.

The idea is catching on regionally, too. In January, a new program called go!FIT Greater Cleveland gave every adult resident of Cuyahoga County who didn’t already have a gym

membership the chance to use any YMCA or Curves in the area free for 90 days. More than 25,000 people registered for the program with more than 14,000 actually participating (it was a multi-step registration process). Participants were weighed, answered quality-of-life questions, reported their exercise durations and frequency, and participated in weight management sessions through the program.

Sponsored by both the county and city, as well as by Cleveland Clinic, Curves, YMCA of Greater Cleveland and Dave's Markets, the idea behind go!FIT was to combat a growing obesity rate in the region. Ohio has the second highest obesity-related healthcare costs in the U.S. It is estimated that by 2018 in the six-state Midwest region that includes Ohio, more than half the adult population will be clinically obese.

"Each partner involved in this campaign is committed to improving the health and well-being of Cuyahoga County," said Delos "Toby" Cosgrove, MD, Cleveland Clinic's President and CEO. "By working together to break down the barriers to fitness, nutrition and healthy foods, we hope to initiate a wellness movement that creates a healthier, more productive region and begins to reverse the devastating effects of preventable chronic diseases, improving the quality of life for everyone."

The program follows a 2007 effort called SmokeFree Greater Cleveland in which Cleveland Clinic joined forces with the state, the county and the city to help smokers quit. It is estimated that the program helped more than 3,000 people quit smoking.

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