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MY VIEW

Business plays role in obesity crisis

BUSINESS MONDAY

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NEWS ON THE GO

BY SHARI PORTNOY
Special to The Miami Herald

The obesity crisis is on the rise. Large companies, government agencies and school boards bear the brunt by continuing to pay expensive healthcare premiums. According to the American Journal of Health Promotion, each obese employee costs his or her company 56 percent more for health insurance than each normal weight employee.

Corporate Wellness is the new buzz phrase. Corporate health programs came into vogue when groups contracted by business and health insurance companies began providing annual health fairs. Unfortunately, research has shown that annual health fairs do nothing to improve health. Without ongoing programs, a health fair rates a big fat zero.

There are solutions for big employees, but a yearly health fair is not one of them. The Food and Drug Administration has no simple answer to obesity. The FDA says science dictates that diet and physical activity must be addressed together. The FDA's obesity working group recommendations address effective consumer messages that lead to "healthier living." It seems to me the FDA, like big business, needs to dig deeper. What additional research is needed? We all agree that we eat too much and exercise too little.

PREVENTION IS KEY

U.S. corporations face an uphill battle in efforts to slim down employees. An economist for Innovus stated in Forbes, "We've proven that we can't fight obesity in this country." He has it all wrong. An economist can't see the solution because his narrow vision is focused on a specific outcome, not prevention. If an economist missed the solution, how can management expect to spot it?

"Current approaches to controlling healthcare costs are not working because they ignore the true drivers of cost. If insurers and their employers are serious about reining in healthcare spending, then obesity prevention should be at the top of the agenda," said Kenneth Thorpe in the American Journal of Health Promotion.

My awakening came when I was working at a health fair for county sanitation workers. Their insurance company hired an outside "wellness" company to do cholesterol screenings, body-fat analysis and provide health information. The employees took blood tests and had their results and diagnoses handed over coldly by a morbidly obese nurse without an action plan. Soundbites like, "Your cholesterol is high; eat oatmeal. Your blood pressure is high, lose weight," without counseling or continuing programs lack merit, especially when explained by an obese person. As the dietitian, I had a small table with handouts. Out of the nearly 100 workers I saw, just 4 percent were in a normal weight range.

EFFICIENCY CAN HURT

One employee told me he gained weight because he doesn't get exercise anymore. Three years ago the department purchased new trucks. The old trucks had one driver and two workers on the back who got exercise all day long by hopping on and off the truck. The driver and back workers swapped in the middle of the day so all three had plenty of exercise.

Then, the new automatic trucks arrived. No need for the two workers on the back anymore. No need to haul the trash and hop on and off the truck. No need to move your legs more than a few inches all day.

The new trucks saved money and decreased injuries but added to the obesity crisis, without compensation. Decision-makers, take note. Health and safety are two separate issues. When these workers went from physical labor to being sedentary, they paid the price in their waistlines. A health fair once a year can't do what regular exercise or dieting can. Think outside of the box for solutions because obesity affects the bottom line. For instance, reevaluate the food offerings in the cafeteria and vending machines. Also, appoint a person within your company to be in charge of wellness and make sure he or she leads by example.

In addition, a CEO or manager is a role model and should look the part of a healthy person, too. You may not realize it, but the workforce is relying on you.

Shari Portnoy is a registered and licensed dietitian consultant in the Miami area.

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