

CAN CEOS CURE CANCER?

BIG PHARMA EXECES MAY NOT KNOW MORE ABOUT THE DISEASE THAN THE REST OF US, BUT A GROUP OF THEM ARE USING THEIR POWER TO FIGHT IT.

BY TINKER READY

"If you are going to have a successful corporate program, it has to be directed from the top," says William Weldon, the CEO of [Johnson & Johnson](#). He could be talking about cost-cutting initiatives or a new talent-management protocol. Instead, he's talking about cancer prevention.

Weldon is chairman of the CEO Roundtable on Cancer, an association of bigfoot leaders, mostly from Big Pharma, who have joined forces to create best practices for anticancer policies. Launched by former [GlaxoSmithKline](#) CEO Robert Ingram—at the urging of former President George H.W. Bush, who lost a child to cancer—the organization last year created a "CEO Gold Standard" plan. Among other things, it requires companies that sign on to cover the full cost of cancer-related treatments that traditional insurance plans often balk at, from cancer screening to nutritional counseling to experimental treatments. They also ban smoking, not just inside their corporate buildings but outside on the grounds as well. So far, 13 companies have gone for the gold, including J&J, software developer SAS Institute, and drugmaker [Novartis](#).

The CEOs on board say it's not about the money. "I don't think anyone is entering into this for financial gain," says Weldon. "They're entering into it for the health of their employees.... To me, if we can save one life, that is profound."

Employees who have benefited from their company's anticancer initiatives are living proof of Weldon's words. "SAS took away the burden of all the other stuff, and we could just concentrate on beating the cancer," says

Weldon thinks there's plenty of evidence to support his anticancer cause—including a five-year study of J&J's own efforts. "We can show a reduction in absenteeism, we can show a reduction in our health-care costs," he says, pointing to a study that found \$225 in savings per employee in annual health costs. "We have documentation of this, as do others."

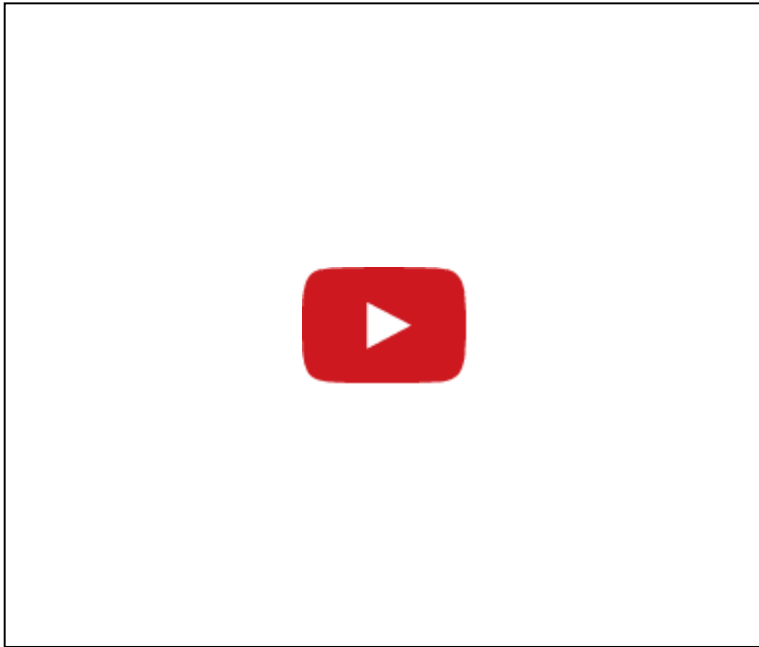
The biggest challenge to the anticancer effort, though, may be the increasingly global nature of business—and the difficulty of applying U.S. health standards abroad. The Gold Standard accreditation only covers U.S. sites, but some companies are enforcing it worldwide. More than half of J&J's 122,000 workers are outside the United States and it's trying to ban smoking everywhere, according to Dr. Fik Isaac, its director of global health services. But in places such as Germany and Sweden, union contracts limit the company's ability to enforce such a policy unilaterally, Isaac says. Cultural issues create other obstacles. According to the World Health Organization, even the strong clinical evidence against smoking hasn't blunted the habit in many foreign locales.

The roundtable, though, is undaunted in its mission. Its roots are in a group called the National Dialogue on Cancer, which was heavy on nonprofits and light on business leaders. It evolved into the roundtable—and has more impact—because "America's corporations are headed by CEOs who don't do dialogue well," says Martin Murphy, a journal editor and longtime researcher who works with the roundtable. "They are action-oriented."

Correction: This article attributed a quote to SAS software developer Mark Holdaway; his name is Keith Holdaway.

A version of this article appeared in the July/August 2007 issue of FAST COMPANY magazine.

[close X]



Advertisement

[Click Here to Learn More](#)

ADD NEW COMMENT

SIGN IN

Type your comment here.

0 COMMENTS

No comments yet. Be the first!