

Employee Benefit Adviser

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Going for gold: Nonprofit group offers gold standard designation to programs battling cancer

At \$1 an apple, there weren't many takers at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center's cafeterias. The center's wellness team got the price lowered to 75 cents to encourage diners to eat more fresh fruit. Count it as one small step in the battle against cancer.

The cancer center in Houston is one of 13 employers accredited since 2006 by the CEO Roundtable on Cancer, a nonprofit group of 27 CEOs that battles the rare, but costly and often fatal, disease in working-age adults. Formed in 2001 at the behest of former President George H.W. Bush, whose 4-year-old daughter died of cancer in the 1950s, the group's previously low profile is getting higher as it promotes its "CEO Cancer Gold Standard" program.

The Roundtable's goal is "to make continual progress toward the elimination of cancer as a personal disease and as a public health concern," according to its Web site, www.ceoroundtableoncancer.org. In practice, that means getting as many employers as possible to adopt its program of risk reduction, early detection and quality care.

'A practical approach'



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The Roundtable's premise is that CEOs who make cancer a health priority for their organizations can prompt HR/benefits policies, wellness programs and health plan designs that will impact medical costs, employee health and productivity.

"From the CEOs' standpoint, it's a practical approach. Putting in practices and measures to prevent [and treat] cancer is common-sense reasoning," says John N. Dornan Jr., who became the Roundtable's first executive director in April.

Although the Gold Standard focuses on cancer, "it'll have an impact on other diseases," such as diabetes and heart disease, notes program manager Peggy Harrington. "If someone starts to exercise, eat right and stop smoking, it'll affect those diseases as well."

A leading cause of death of Americans ages 35 to 65, cancer affects only 1.6% of commercially insured employees and dependents, but accounts for 10% of annual medical claims costs, studies show. An employee with cancer averages \$2,390 in claims per month, compared with \$360 for an employee without cancer, according to a report by consulting firm Milliman. A single case can cost more than \$100,000.

Gold Standard employers say their concern goes beyond saving money. "I don't think we have any more cancer than anywhere else, but as a firm that relies on its people, we're well aware of how devastating the disease is both physically and psychologically," says Gregory S. Gallopoulos, managing partner of Jenner & Block L.L.P., a 1,100-person law firm based in Chicago.

For other employers, Gold Standard accreditation extends their involvement with cancer. For example, M.D. Anderson is a major academic cancer center. AstraZeneca manufactures cancer drugs. Edelman, a global public-relations agency, got involved through its client, Johnson & Johnson, whose CEO, William C. Weldon, heads the Roundtable. (See sidebar for full list of accredited organizations.)

"We wanted to walk the walk," says Bruce Hayes, global managing director of health at Chicago-based Edelman. Among other initiatives, the firm offers \$500 to any of its 1,510 U.S. employees who quit smoking for six months or more.

Most accredited companies are large health care and pharmaceutical organizations whose CEOs form the core of the Roundtable, but employers of any size and industry can apply for accreditation for free and need not be Roundtable members.

What matters most is the ability to meet the Gold Standard's 23-point checklist in five areas: tobacco use, diet and nutrition, physical activity, screening and early detection and access to quality treatment and clinical trials.

Getting with the program

At least one-third of the 559,650 cancer deaths expected this year can be prevented by better managing weight, diet and exercise, reports the American Cancer Society. Employers can't force employees to eat more salads or take up jogging, but they can create and sustain a culture that supports such behaviors.



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"The environmental support part is huge," says William Baun, manager of wellness programs at M.D. Anderson. Besides lowering the price of apples, he installed 12 "stress-buster stations" of exercise equipment located in hallways around the sprawling campus to help employees who are on their feet a lot stretch their legs and relieve stress.

Many employers already have some pieces in place to become accredited, Harrington says, and "the Gold Standard is a way to pull it all together." The program applies only to U.S. worksites.

(For a list of accreditation requirements, visit www.cancergoldstandard.org//media/docs/accreditation/checklist.pdf.)

Some requirements - such as tobacco-free worksite policies and coverage of cancer screenings - are already common. Others are not, including 100% coverage of "evidence-based" tobacco treatments, education about clinical trials and access to cancer care at 1,400-plus facilities approved by the American College of Surgeons' Commission on Cancer and the federal National Cancer Institute.

While many requirements are fairly specific, others - for example, "sustain a culture that supports healthy food choices" - are open-ended. "We help [employers] develop programs that fit their workplace," Dornan says. HR, benefits and medical staff are usually the implementers.

Companies have taken various steps to meet the Gold Standard, from handing out pedometers to eliminating copays for cancer screenings. Some changes took more time and thought than others.

Banning smoking both indoors and outdoors was a challenge for software developer SAS Institute. "We've never been the kind of company to tell people what to do and what not to do," says Jeff Chambers, vice president of HR.

SAS gave its 5,168 U.S. employees six months' notice that all sites, including the 900-acre headquarters campus in Cary, N.C., would become smoke-free effective July 1. "We're expecting voluntary compliance," Chambers say.

Similarly, drugmaker AstraZeneca expanded its smoke-free policy from its Wilmington, Del., headquarters to three other U.S. sites and even the vehicles of its 7,000 salespeople. "If we have salespeople selling cancer drugs, what kind of image is that to have them smoke?" posits Dr. Joe Henry, the company's executive director of safety, health and environment.

Many accredited organizations also tweaked health plan design by eliminating copays for smoking-cessation drugs and counseling as well as expanding networks to include certain cancer facilities and cutting cost barriers to participation in clinical trials.

"We don't anticipate it will have much of a financial impact," says Ann Skye, who manages wellness programs at Quintiles Transnational Corp., of her company's health plan changes. Clinical trials - often excluded by health plans as experimental care - does not cost patients much because trial sponsors pay for their medical care. Quintiles, a pharmaceutical services company based in Research Triangle Park, N.C., has 5,200 U.S. employees.

Eating is another big area of change. Edelman's popular afternoon snack cart now offers fruit, granola bars, water and juice, as well as candy, chips and soda. Jenner & Block's dinner buffet for those working late added a vegetarian option and lists nutrition data for many items. It's working, Gallopoulos says - at least for him. "I have completely renounced junk food. I haven't had a cookie in months, and I've been eating a tremendous amount of fresh fruit."

Early success

The big question is whether the Roundtable's efforts will reduce cancer diagnoses and deaths. There's no hard data so far, though the Roundtable plans to work with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to measure outcomes. Members say they plan to track participation in wellness programs, study medical and disability claims and analyze the results of health risk assessments. In the meantime, they point to a few early successes.

About 200 Quintiles employees have quit smoking since September 2006, saving about \$700,000 in medical costs. AstraZeneca's on-site mammograms yield a higher-than-average 90% screening rate among female employees and have caught more than 30 malignancies. Jenner & Block ran out of pedometers twice and had to get more to keep its walking program going.

Despite the lack of solid results, accredited companies seem gung-ho about their cancer-fighting programs.

"I really believe in this," Gallopoulos says.

"You know you're spending your resources wisely."

Carolyn Hirschman is a freelance writer based in Rockville, Md., and a frequent contributor to EBN.

Organizations accredited by the CEO Roundtable on Cancer

American Cancer Society American Legacy Foundation AstraZeneca
U.S. Edelman Enzon Pharmaceuticals Inc. GlaxoSmithKline Jenner & Block L.L.P. Johnson &
Johnson M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Novartis OSI Pharmaceuticals Inc. Quintiles Transnational
Corp. SAS Institute

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