CHAPTER 8

ARE WORKPLACE WELLNESS PROGRAMS HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH?

One area of widespread spending that typically has little benefit—and no cost savings—is workplace wellness programs. To start, they're usually sold on mathematically impossible ROIs and undisclosed commission models that enormously benefit brokers. This has caused Al Lewis, former workplace wellness industry proponent turned leading critic, to offer a $2 million reward to anyone who can prove that the industry has reduced employers' medical claims costs enough to cover its $8 billion annual cost.[85] So far, his money is safe.

By way of background, Lewis was a workplace wellness industry insider, called one of the founding fathers of disease management.[86] Now, he's CEO of Quizzify, a provider of employee health literacy programs, and author of several best-selling books on measuring the outcomes of employee health improvement programs, especially workplace wellness programs (check out *Surviving Workplace Wellness* and *Why Nobody Believes the Numbers*).

Promoters place workplace wellness programs among the most important advances in medical history, equivalent in impact to vaccines and antibiotics (their words).[87] Detractors call it a "scam." An entire website, www.theysaidwhat.net, is devoted to exposing its many alleged lies and misdeeds.

Obviously, it can't be both a significant advance and total scam. It's critical to know which though, because there is a very specific distinction between workplace wellness programs and everything else in this book. Whereas everything else is an unfortunate byproduct of insuring your employees in today's status quo market, these programs are a totally optional undertaking.

Workplace wellness program fees typically cost employers $100 to $150 per employee per year. Plus a similar amount in employee incentives to encourage usage. Plus lost work time to participate in screening programs and complete health risk assessments. Plus administrative time to ensure compliance with relevant laws and regulations. Add these up and you start to see that the total costs are much more than just vendor fees. All this to generate great employee dissatisfaction, judging by the fact that a 2016 *Slate* article entitled "Workplace Wellness is a Sham" generated more shares than any other *Slate* article on either health care or the workplace that year.[88]

Lewis advocates a much simpler approach to preventive care, regular screenings based on well-established clinical guidelines developed by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine.[89] To balance the harms of overscreening, misdiagnosis, and overtreatment against the benefits of early detection, the USPSTF guidelines recommend far fewer blood screenings, far less frequently than most vendors advocate. These guidelines are easily accessible through the Choosing Wisely initiative, a partnership between the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation and *Consumer Reports* that seeks to advance a national dialogue on avoiding wasteful or unnecessary medical tests, treatments, and procedures.[90]

Promoters Undercut Their Own Data

Tellingly, promoters' own data consistently and convincingly undermine their claims, which is easily shown using facts, data, and basic arithmetic. Here are some examples to support this thesis—keep in mind that we're using what the industry says about itself.

1. A national leading workplace wellness program promoter's own conclusions and assertions have shown that a perfect workplace wellness program targeting cardiac care would have a negative ROI of $100 per employee per year.
2. An analysis in *Health Affairs* of Connecticut's workplace wellness program concluded that it increased costs. The state justified it by saying it increased the number of checkups, even though the US Preventive Services Task Force Guidelines and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* have concluded that checkups don't improve health and are more likely to find problems that don't exist.
3. The Health Enhancement Research Organization's—the wellness industry's trade association—own guidebook shows that workplace wellness programs don't generate positive ROI.
4. The industry's trade publication has published articles that conclude 90 to 95 percent of workplace wellness programs have no impact, that only poorly-designed clinical studies on programs show strong ROI, and that an editor concluded "Who cares about an ROI anyway?"
5. The data submitted by winners of the industry's top Koop award—which is selected by wellness industry executives—over the last couple of years show that they didn't save money and, in some cases, showed that health actually deteriorated.

These are just a few examples of many I could have selected. If you want to dive deeper, Appendix A has more detailed summaries for each.

The Bottom Line

I can only conclude two things from these examples.

First, there are no savings in conventional workplace wellness programs. Giving employees lots of time off to exercise might be a good idea for other reasons—just don't try to calculate savings from it.

Second, there's no getting around it. Many, if not most, vendors lie about ROI.

Money spent on workplace wellness programs—upwards of $100 to $150 per employee per year just for the vendor fees—is wasted. Plus, this doesn't include all the peripheral tangible and intangible costs, like time spent engaging in the programs. Further, the fees cover only the administrative medical expenses, not the expenses submitted via claims forms. Superfluous annual checkups urged by vendors probably double that figure. Employee incentives to get them to use programs likely double it again.

Speaking of ROI, the fastest way in this book to create a ROI is to reduce screening frequencies to follow established, age-appropriate, USPSTF guidelines. Not only will you avoid the expense, but you'll also avoid potentially harming your employees. Based on the data in this book alone, that would be a significant improvement over what is happening now.

Another possibility would be to explore the proposed 401W Savings Plan, which aligns incentives between employers and employees to work towards long-term health maintenance, while saving employers money and quite literally giving people financial responsibility for taking care of themselves.[91] It also increases employee retention, as well as program satisfaction.

Sound good so far? If you need one more reason to look into the 401W Savings Plan, here it is. As most people in the industry know, Al Lewis is the Mikey of wellness. He hates everything. But he likes this a lot.[92]

Yes, Virginia, There Are Workplace Wellness Programs That Work

Like ABC's Wide World of Sports, we've spanned the globe looking for workplace wellness programs that work. We 've found three.

First is Cummins, a diesel engine manufacturer with 55,000 employees. When *Fortune*, went looking for the best, this was the one they found.[93] After years of trying to "preach the gospel" of wellness with conventional screenings, Cummins realized it wasn't working. So they rebooted a new model with a "continuum" of services that employees could select from to reach their goals. Plus, much of what Cummins does is environmental—such as workplace design—so there is no need for employees to "opt in." Well-being comes to them.

For those who want to adopt a healthier lifestyle, Cummins offers many opt-in opportunities. This is in sharp contrast to conventional programs that try to make employees healthy whether they want it or not. No wonder they consistently make the *Fortune* list of the 100 best places to work.

Next, *Workforce* magazine highlighted the Hilliard County (OH) Schools.[94] Their wellness leader, Debbie Youngblood, had the insight that, for example, you can't teach employees to eat less sugar if they don't know where that sugar is hidden in the ingredients labels.

"It always surprises me," says Ms. Youngblood, "that we expect people to know how to achieve overall well-being. [Yet] we've given them very little opportunity to know, understand, and practice the things that might be beneficial."

For a third example, we turned to the very same Al Lewis who basically finds fault in everything workplace wellness and challenged him to come up with one. Surely, in all his travels, he had found a single program—just one—that worked. He thought for a minute and then said: "Wait a sec! The one I'm in, Boston College's, is great. They actually screen me according to guidelines. I mean, that shouldn't win them a Nobel Prize, but in this industry, it does.

"Plus, when I go in for my screen—every three years, just like the guidelines say—I'm always trying to find fault, but instead I am amazed at how good the guidance is. Totally up to date on carbs and fat, no telling me to get a PSA test or other inappropriate interventions, and knowledgeable staff. And no wonder. They get their program from Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, the top-ranked health plan in the country basically every year, according to the National Committee for Quality Assurance."