



January 2010

Sue Ann Says: Learn How to Make Your Workplace Mental-Health Friendly

Here's a mind-boggling statistic: Nearly 25% of the U.S. workforce, (28 million workers ages 18-54) experiences a mental or substance abuse disorder. And yet, so many of them don't have or have limited access to mental health care, or won't seek it due to the stigma associated with mental illnesses.

It was timely, then, that the recent Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation's 4th Annual Dialogue brought together leaders in business, health care, public policy and those living with mental illness to explore issues and challenges in workplace mental health. Our panel of experts and an audience of nearly 150 identified action steps to create a healthier workplace, erase the stigma of mental illness, and improve conditions for people with mental disease.

I encourage you to read on for a summary of our spirited Dialogue discussion:

Mental illness is costly to employers and the economy

Mental illness is extremely costly to employers, both through lost productivity and increased healthcare and disability expenses. Panelist, David Katzelnick, MD noted that clinical depression is one of America's most costly illnesses. When left untreated, depression is as costly as heart disease or AIDS to the U.S. economy. The economic burden of depression in 2000 – a decade ago – was \$83.1 billion. Less than a third of this cost was in direct medical costs; almost two-thirds were in workplace costs. Dr. Katzelnick estimates that the cost is probably more than \$100 billion today.

“What employers may not know is that studies show that treatment for mental illness is effective and, when compared to treatment for other chronic illnesses, yields improved health outcomes, improved productivity and a positive return on investment,” Wisconsin Department of Health Services, secretary Karen Timberlake, told Dialogue participants.

Mental illness goes undiagnosed and untreated because of stigma and other barriers

Despite the very high success rate of treatment for mental illness, research shows that mental health conditions still go largely unidentified and untreated. Dialogue participants discussed barriers to accessing care, which include the lack of or inadequate insurance coverage. They agreed that the most significant barrier is the stigma associated with mental illness.

As a true medical condition that can be effectively treated, mental illness should be viewed the same way as diabetes, heart disease and other medical conditions.

“Mental health parity in insurance is just the first step,” said Dialogue moderator, Dr. Zorba Paster. “There should be no more stigmas associated with mental illness than with seeking

treatment for asthma or heart disease. Once society understands that mental illness is a real medical condition, that evidence-based treatment works, and that recovery is possible, we will begin to erase that stigma.”

Employers can ensure access & save costs through expanded mental health benefits

Over the past several decades, employers have focused on preventive healthcare and wellness programs as an effective method to create a healthier work force and manage healthcare quality and costs. Behavioral health benefits, if any, typically have been a hodgepodge of employee assistance programs (EAP), disability management, health promotion programs and limited benefits for mental health and substance abuse services.

Panelist Dianne Kiehl said that limited and restrictive behavioral health benefits have other consequences: it drives people to the primary care setting for identification and treatment of mental health issues. Primary care physicians typically lack the expertise to provide high quality care for this very specialized area of medicine. Treatment is usually limited only to medication and patients go without psychotherapeutic treatment.

Only recently have employers begun to understand that behavioral health care must be an essential component of the overall health plan, coordinated and well integrated with all other health benefits.

Summary

Addressing mental health, educating employees about behavioral wellness, fostering a mental health-friendly workplace, and improving access to behavioral health care is not only the right thing to do, it provides a high return on investment. A workforce that is both physically and mentally healthy increases productivity, attendance and retention. A healthy workforce also helps control healthcare and disability costs. Investing in workplace behavioral wellness is good for employees, good for companies, and good for the economy.

To read the 4th Annual Dialogue White Paper in its entirety, please visit our Web site at www.wwhf.org. Learn more about this issue and make a difference in your workplace.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-

profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

(Sidebar)

75% of health care costs are associated with chronic illness. Mental health and substance use disorders are the most chronic illnesses due to their early onset and high prevalence. They also impact other chronic conditions. Therefore, we cannot address the cost of health care, and promote a productive workforce, without adequately addressing these disorders.” – David Shern, president and CEO, Mental Health America

(Sidebar)

“The burden of mental illness on health and productivity in the United States and throughout the world has long been profoundly underestimated.” — U.S. Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health