An Action Plan for Workforce Health and Prevention
There is VALUE in health.

There is POWER in prevention.

Bringing health and prevention to the workplace is vital for health care reform.
Introduction

Business leaders are increasingly recognizing that the economic health of their companies is inextricably linked to the physical health of their employees. A growing body of research shows that improved employee health equals improved employee productivity.

Unfortunately, the American workforce is not as healthy, nor as productive, as it could or should be. The overall health of Americans is on the decline, with studies showing a dramatic rise in recent years of chronic disease across all age groups.

At the same time, the aging of the baby boomers – the so called “silver tsunami” – is changing the profile of the workplace and putting new pressure on America’s overburdened and underfunded health care system.

In short: Our workforce – the engine that drives our economy and supports the financial underpinnings of our health care system – is ailing and aging. With the rise of chronic disease, even young workers are sicker, and many older workers are exiting the workplace altogether. The balance between economic net contributors (“workers”) and those dependent on government programs such as Medicare and Medicaid is undergoing a radical shift. The pipeline of a healthy, productive workforce in the United States is threatened.

How can the nation meet its obligations to its long-term health care programs if this is the case? The answer is that it can’t. Something has to change. The United States must find a way to bolster and improve the health and productivity of its national workforce.

The American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) believes that the time has come for the nation to focus on improving health as the central goal and the workplace as a critical location in addressing sustainable health reform.

True health care reform can’t be achieved without this shift in focus. Moreover, without a healthy, able and available workforce, the United States will find it impossible to thrive in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

ACOEM believes that prospects for both successful health reform and economic vitality can be improved by leveraging the value of health and the power of prevention in the workplace, yielding a sustainable, healthy and productive workforce.

We believe that by incorporating evidence-based health programs, policies and practices into the workplace, the health, safety, well-being, and productivity of the American workforce can be elevated and protected. But U.S. policies must change in order to make this possible.

More than 130 million workers spend the majority of their productive adult lives working. Let’s reach out to them – in the workplace – and leverage true health reform to improve the health and productivity of the workforce.

The time to act is now.
ACOEM’s Health Reform Action Plan for Prevention

ACOEM is committed to improving the health of the workforce by advancing the following public policy agenda:

1. Establish the Office of Worker Health and Productivity within the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Office of Public Health and Science to:
   a. Develop and implement a promotional campaign directed to employers that explains the business value of a healthy workforce and provides best-practice employer case-study examples.
   b. Collect, develop and disseminate evidence-based, easy-to-use, and accessible workplace health promotion information, tools, resources and implementation strategies.
   c. Convene a Federal Advisory Committee on Worker Health and Productivity.
   d. Develop, implement and support a worker health promotion certification and accreditation program for workplace health promotion initiatives.

2. Establish a President’s Council on Worker Health and Productivity to advise the President and recommend to the U.S. Congress preventive-based health measures in the workplace to ensure that America’s workforce remains healthy and productive.
   a. The Council would be chaired by the Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and include representatives from HHS, the Department of Labor, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Commerce, the Small Business Administration, the United States Department of Agriculture, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency.
   b. The Council will submit recommendations to Congress within 18 months of enactment and annually thereafter.

3. Require employer-provided health plans to include an integrated health and productivity enhancement program for worksite prevention, health promotion and health protection that is under the direction of a qualified occupational medicine physician.
   a. By regulation, the Secretary of HHS would determine elements to be included in an integrated health and productivity enhancement program including, but not limited to:
      i. Health-awareness component, including health education, health screenings and occupational health surveillance.
      ii. Health-risk assessment component to identify health risk prevalence rates and health risk categories to determine population-specific tailored interventions.
      iii. Behavioral change component, including programs related to tobacco use, obesity and depression.
      iv. Culture-of-health component, including policies and practices promoting an environment of health improvement and protection.
   b. By regulation, the Secretary of HHS would ensure to the greatest extent possible that workplace-based primary, secondary and tertiary prevention programs are integrated within new approaches to medical care delivery such as patient-centered, primary-care and physician-driven medical home models.
4. Require employer-provided health plans to reimburse for preventive services provided to employees as part of an integrated health and productivity enhancement program, including preventive services recommended by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

5. Pass federal legislation that would provide a tax credit to companies that offer effective and comprehensive wellness programs, and include the following key elements:
   a. Qualified wellness programs would be certified by the Office of Worker Health and Productivity rather than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (see #1 above).
   b. Qualified wellness programs must be consistent with research and best practices as identified by the Federal Advisory Committee on Worker Health and Productivity and approved by the Secretary of HHS (see #1c above).
   c. Eligibility for the tax credit would depend in part on the employer meeting established standards for occupational health and safety, as determined by the Assistant Secretary of Labor for OSHA, and having a lost workday injury rate less than the national average from general schedule safety inspections.

6. Amend existing federal law to provide funding from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for occupational medicine residency programs that include training modules specific to health and productivity to ensure an adequate supply of Board-certified occupational medicine physicians.
   Rationale: The U.S. will not be able to meet its obligations under Medicare and Social Security if the engine that supplies the financing – the workforce – is not healthy and productive. Physicians qualified in occupational medicine – who can advance improved health in the workplace – can help address this need. The workplace is an ideal delivery site to advance health promotion. While community health and primary care have limited interactions with the individual, the worksite provides opportunities for multiple interactions.

7. The Secretary of HHS, through CMS, will fund research to determine the most effective health and productivity enhancement strategies including, but not limited to, health promotion, health protection and disease management practices in the workplace.
The Role of Occupational Physicians in Workplace Health Reform

There is growing consensus that proactive health measures in the workplace will be necessary as the American workforce begins to deal with demographic changes and the rise of chronic disease.

In this new environment, the nation's occupational medicine physicians and the organization that represents them – ACOEM – play a unique and critically needed role.

In the early days of occupational medicine, physicians specializing in the health of employees were primarily reactive to the injuries that occurred in the workplace. Workers who became sick or were injured came to the worksite clinic; the physician's focus was not on prevention or the overall health and wellness of the worker or workplace, but on treating the injured employee.

In more recent years, however, the role of the occupational medicine physician has changed significantly.

As the workforce has grown in size and complexity, and as prevention and wellness have become a greater part of the health care equation, occupational medicine has expanded its scope and presence accordingly, contributing scientific research, new clinical guidelines for medical care, and public health programming aimed at the workforce.

Occupational medicine physicians have become the nation's leading experts in the complex interplay of factors that affect health in the workplace; developing expertise in determining the ability of employees to perform work; the arrangements of work, the physical, chemical, biological, and social environments of the workplace; and the health outcomes of environmental exposures. They are skilled at using the tools of preventive medicine to improve the health of a defined population of workers and their families.

Perhaps most importantly, occupational medicine physicians occupy a critical position at the center of virtually all health-related transactional activities in the workplace. They represent the single part of the workplace health infrastructure that is often connected with virtually all of the other parts – senior management, benefits and human resources, legal, workers' compensation, government regulatory agencies, labor and unions, hospitals, and public health organizations. Occupational medicine physicians are a fulcrum of workplace health, serving as an important point of liaison between employer, employee, government, and all components of the health care system – understanding the needs and challenges of each of these diverse groups. They provide a unique bridge between the clinical/scientific medical community and the business-based employer community.

Why a Healthy Workforce?

Employers of all sizes and types increasingly are using strategies based on the relationship between health and productivity to lower health risks, reduce the burden of illness, improve wellness and human performance, and enhance the quality of life for workers and their families, while reducing total health-related costs. Such programs help employers more accurately determine which health conditions have the greatest impact on overall productivity and then design strategies to help their employees prevent or better manage these conditions.

There is more to be done. Most employers have not adopted these programs.

One of the objectives of the national Healthy People 2010 program, for example, is that 75 percent of worksites should offer a comprehensive employee health promotion program to employees. But studies have found that the nation is falling far short of that objective.
Another objective of Healthy People 2010 is to increase the proportion of employees who participate in employer-sponsored health promotion activities to 75 percent. However, the Midcourse Review, Healthy People 2010 found that employee participation was significantly dropping, rather than increasing.

Statistics show that on average, employees spend approximately 2,000 hours a year at work, but spend a tiny fraction of that time – literally only a few minutes – with a medical care provider.

Clearly, employers need tools and incentives to implement health promotion activities and programs.

The workplace offers unique resources and infrastructure for improving health. In an environment in which health costs are skyrocketing, health promotion and health protection measures aimed at the nation’s workforce can have significant long-term impact, potentially saving billions in costs. Furthermore, the positive impact of reaching large populations through the workplace extends beyond those currently employed. Families of the employed, retirees and other beneficiaries could also benefit from integrated health and productivity strategies implemented by the nation’s employers.

The fundamental philosophy driving the adoption of these strategies is that health is not only of great value to individuals and populations, but also of great value to business and industry. It is important for all employers – whether small, medium or large – to look beyond health care benefits as a cost to be managed and rather, view the benefits of good health as an investment to be leveraged. Ultimately, a healthier, more productive workforce can help drive greater profitability for employers as well as contribute to a healthier economy and more stable health care system.

About ACOEM

As the leading organization representing occupational medicine physicians, ACOEM coalesces and advances knowledge and understanding of the complex interplay of workforce health issues – ranging from the development of clinical care guidelines to policy research. ACOEM’s peer-reviewed journal, the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (JOEM), is the leading publisher of scientific research aimed at workplace health. It has been a particularly strong proponent of advanced research in the area of workplace health and productivity, making this one of its key points of advocacy over the last several years.

In 2008, ACOEM launched a major health and productivity initiative, including hosting the first-ever national summit on health and productivity, expanding its Health and Productivity Management Center and publishing major studies and policy papers in JOEM. A key part of this initiative is the promotion of research that helps employers accurately measure the connection between health and productivity, while providing resources to help them develop wellness and prevention programs for their workers.

To Learn More

Visit ACOEM’s web site at www.acoem.org or call us at 847-818-1800.