

Florida Medical Business

Volume 16 / Number 1

Tuesday, January 7, 2003 - January 21, 2003

NBHD slashes insurance costs with preventive medicine program

By CATHERINE LACKNER

For most employers, the most threatening aspect of the 2003 balance sheet promises to be spiraling health insurance costs. The country's largest insurers have notified companies that they'll be passing along double-digit premium increases, slashing benefits and raising co-pays.

At the North Broward Hospital District, however, that trend is being reversed with a preventive medicine program.

In January 2000, the district rolled out InterRxVent, a lifestyle management program aimed at improving the health of its employees and reducing claims. Founded by South African cardiologist Neil Gordon, MD, and headquartered in Savannah, Ga., InterRxVent USA is the country's foremost risk reduction program.

"We purchased the software rights," and set about creating a program for employees, said Susan Pickel, InterRxVent program manager for the district.

Significant savings

The results are in: a study of more than 2,400 health care claims showed that expenses for participating employees decreased by 12 percent, while they increased more than 25 percent for a control group of people who did not participate.

"The merits of InterRxVent as a cost containment strategy are significant," said Sheldon T. Warman, MD, the district's medical director. "Currently, health care claims are projected to rise 20 percent per year. If companies could slow the expected increase in medical costs for their employees to any degree, the savings would be substantial."

The district runs more than 40 health care facilities, including five acute-care hospitals and a network of primary care centers. As of November, there were 5,735 benefit-eligible employees; 2,052 or 36 percent, were enrolled in InterRxVent.

"It is especially noteworthy that the reduction in claims was achieved in only two years," Pickel said. "Other studies of worksite health promotion programs indicate claims may increase initially, with reductions projected after three to five years."

The findings of this study should motivate other employers, especially those that are self-insured, to implement comprehensive lifestyle management and risk reduction programs such as InterRxVent, Pickel added.

At the district, "We're basically self-insured," she said. Employees can choose from an HMO or PPO, but there are co-payments associated with both. "The impact on employees was that as their health improved, they had fewer doctor visits."

So successful was the InterRxVent program that, last October, it was expanded and offered to the City of Fort Lauderdale's management staff. Nearly 200 managers are participating now and

the district is planning to market InterRxVent to other corporate clients and individuals as well.

"I have already submitted a proposal to Broward Community College and in the coming year we're going to be targeting major corporations here which have 100 employees or more," Pickel said. "They are probably the ones that would really benefit from this."

The North Broward program begins with a comprehensive cardiovascular health screen that

glucose levels, body weight and smoking status.

While many corporate offices have gyms or other health-focused facilities, "We teach people how to do little things that end up changing their risk factors," said Pickel, adding that the personal approach is key to the program's success.

"Unlike a computer program, where you can log on and it designs a diet for you, there is an accountability factor when you have to go personally and see someone every so often. People like that."

"The merits of InterRxVent as a cost containment strategy are significant. Currently, health care claims are projected to rise 20 percent per year. If companies could slow the expected increase in medical costs for their employees to any degree, the savings would be substantial."

— Sheldon T. Warman, MD, medical director, North Broward Hospital District

includes lab analysis of cholesterol, glucose and triglyceride levels. After the results are analyzed, a customized action plan is drawn up for each employee, who then meets with an assigned health professional or mentor for approximately 20 brief, one-on-one counseling sessions throughout the first year of their program.

Assessments are conducted at the start, after 12 weeks and after one year. For those wishing to continue, sessions are scheduled monthly with assessments conducted every six months.

In addition to individualized counseling, participants receive audio lessons, log books, educational kits (60 topics are available), opportunities to go on guided shopping trips to local health food markets, healthy recipes, free public lectures on a variety of health issues, newsletters and e-mail health tips.

Easy access

"The beauty of this program is that it's easy for people to access us," Pickel said. Employees can visit any of the district's hospitals or clinics, depending on their work duties, to participate.

"And we customize the program to fit the employee," she noted. "It's not just exercise — a lot of people aren't into that. We have one-on-one relationships between the employee and the mentor, who teaches them about everything from anger management to back health to diabetes."

In addition to the insurance claims reductions, the study found improvements in clinical measures such as blood pressure, total cholesterol, LDL and HDL cholesterol levels, triglyceride and

The employees also influence each other, she said. "It's based on readiness to change. When you start attacking people's risk factors, they're less stressed, they lose weight, they feel better. Their co-workers look at those things and say, 'What are you doing?' It's very exciting."

Results of studies conducted by InterRxVent USA and the North Broward district have been presented at scientific conferences including the American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation National Conference, and the Cardiovascular Health For All 2002 Conference, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health.

"When I was at the Cardiovascular Health conference last April, all of experts there predicted there will be at least a 20 percent rise in health care costs per year," Pickel said. "Unless you start adjusting and dealing with people's risk factors, there's no way you can save health care dollars and maintain services at the same time." ♦



INTERxVENT USA

340 Eisenhower Dr. 1400 Central Park,
Savannah, GA 31406 ♦ 912-353-8323