## **Practice Toolkit: Occupational Health**

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by Ellen B. Jacobs, MEd, RHIA

Much has been written about the benefits of the personal health record (PHR) for patients, providers, and the public. However, employers have received less attention in the PHR literature. Employers have a great interest in keeping their employees healthy. Healthy employees cost less to insure, are absent fewer days, are more productive, and are just happier overall. Employers pay for almost one-third of the healthcare in the US. Healthcare costs include more than health insurance premiums; they include cost of other related benefits such as short- and long-term disability, workers' compensation, employee assistance programs, occupational medicine, and risk management.

## PHRs and Employers

How can employers benefit from the PHR? Several employers have seen a decrease in healthcare expenditures, decreased accident rates, and improved employee morale with the implementation of a wellness program that incorporated a PHR.<sup>2</sup> One employer spent \$285 less per employee per year on healthcare costs on those who participated in the program than on those who did not, for a total return on investment of \$145,350.<sup>3</sup> Looking at a four-year trend comparing those who participated to those who did not, the cost was significantly less.

The PHR is the keystone of a comprehensive Web-based wellness program upon which all other components are based. The wellness components of the program include an individual risk assessment, a personal wellness profile, an individual action plan, and educational modules. The personal wellness profile provides participants with a report that explains many of their modifiable risk factors and lifestyle behaviors, rates participants on each factor, and provides suggestions on how to improve. The individualized action plan includes health trackers, appointments, and reminders. The educational modules are medically based, presented in layman's terms, and are individualized to a participant's healthcare issues and concerns. All of these functions combine as a "trigger" for the employee's pursuit of health improvements.

By incorporating the PHR into a wellness program some of the barriers and disincentives for maintaining one may be overcome. Employees are provided with incentives for participation that are tracked through a point system on the Web site. Participants earn points for completing their PHR, their health risk assessment questionnaire, and individual action plan. The points are then used to offer employer-determined benefits such as reduction in health insurance premiums, time off work, and gift items. This encouragement may overcome individuals' natural reticence about maintaining PHRs. In surveys conducted by the author, common responses to the question, "What has kept you from keeping your own health records?" were "I didn't have time" or "I haven't had a need to yet because I'm healthy."

One of the most valuable assets of a PHR is being able to share it with healthcare providers. While the PHR is not connected electronically to the providers' medical records, participants can print a physician summary to take to their doctor or allow their physician temporary online access to their PHR.

Physicians have expressed concern with providing patients access to their lab results through the Internet without a clinician's intervention. To address this issue, a nurse call line is included in the program. If results from the lab work performed at the health screening are out of range, the wellness program nurse will contact the participant or the Web site will direct the participant to contact the nurse call line. The nurse then explains the results and may suggest the participant contact his or her physician for follow-up.

Another important component that makes this program so effective is the aggregate data reports provided to the employer. These reports are composite pictures of the group's health status and risk factors. Employers can use this data to determine appropriate prevention and wellness programs. For example, if a large percentage of participants are overweight, the employer's cafeteria can offer low-calorie meals or the employer can sponsor walking and weight management programs. The

participants can also document their activities and monitor their weight in the PHR and receive points for their involvement—a win-win situation for all.

Employers are key stakeholders in financially supporting healthcare in the US. Their costs are increasing at an alarming rate. Wellness programs have been shown to slow the growth rate and improve the health of a corporate population. Combining the PHR with effective wellness programs will hopefully result in an even greater opportunity to reduce healthcare costs, gain the support of corporate America, and accelerate consumer awareness and adoption of the PHR.

## **Notes**

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