

News Release



More reasons to put preventative health on business agenda

TORONTO, ON – FEB. 8/2018 – Even small changes in personal behaviour can make big differences in health—and employers are increasingly well positioned to play a vital part, and in turn benefit from lower health benefit costs and improved productivity.

At a panel discussion hosted by the Economic Club of Canada last week, entitled “Quantifying the Costs of an Unhealthy Workforce,” representatives for employers, the Ontario government and health technology providers agreed that preventative health measures can and should do more to reduce healthcare costs, and the workplace is an important environment for motivating individual action.

The economic implications are staggering, noted Susanne Cookson, president of BestLifeRewarded Innovations. Just over half of healthcare costs today, or \$122 billion, are due to lost productivity. Of that, \$69 billion can be traced back to five modifiable health risk factors: tobacco smoking, excess weight, physical inactivity, low fruit and vegetable consumption, and use of alcohol. Multiple research studies demonstrate that even small reductions in these behaviours can prevent chronic diseases and significantly reduce costs.

And there is much room for improvement in Canada: consider, for example, that 68% of Canadians do not eat the recommended daily number of servings of fruits and vegetables; 54% are overweight or obese; and 46% do not meet recommended levels for physical activity.

To put this in better context for employers, BestLifeRewarded developed www.healthy-economics.com, a free online tool that quantifies the economic burden of the five risk factors based on an employee population. For example, a workforce of 1,000 in Ontario, where 50% of employees are male, represents \$2.2 million in direct and indirect costs annually based on current prevalence rates for the five risk factors. A two percent reduction in the number of employees with these risk factors would reduce costs by \$32,600 in the first year, and after three years the cumulative savings—for the employer and the healthcare system—would exceed \$200,000. “This is solid economic data that helps paint the picture on return on investment for employers. Let’s use it and work together to find solutions, because right now we are all paying for costs that are preventable,” said Cookson.

While traditional workplace wellness programs are part of the solution, personalized plans tend to be more effective for people most in need of behavior change. “We’ve learned you can’t use a cookie-cutter approach. Different things work for different people, and personalized wellness

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planning, where people can set personal goals and track their progress, is more successful to motivate self care,” noted Cookson.

Heather Chalmers, vice-president and general manager of GE Healthcare Canada, pointed to the use of health technology as a cost-effective tool for personal health management. “There is so much opportunity to use different digital tools to provide insights in the moment, which are easily digestible.”

On the low-tech side, employers are discovering the value of enabling access to care, particularly when peer support comes into play. GE Healthcare’s mental health strategy, for example, includes “mental health allies” who are trained to help fellow employees access healthcare services. “When we posted this position, we were astounded by how many people applied, from all levels of the organization,” recalled Chalmers. “A toll-free number is in place and it gets called all the time. People are really talking about their situations, and we are seeing the improvements in our short- and long-term disability.”

The public sector is also putting more of a push on personal health management. “Some conditions don’t have cures. Instead we have to learn to live with them by managing the symptoms,” said Dr. Bob Bell, Ontario’s deputy minister of health and long-term care. He cited ongoing pilot projects that use a self-managed approach with group therapy, “which is enormously cost-effective.”

While the prevalence of some health risk factors, such as smoking, have declined, Bell agrees that more can be done in preventative health, and the government is always open to partnering with the private sector. “Ontario does not yet have a chronic disease strategy, nor do we have an upstream strategy on how we should invest in these five health risk behaviours. We can do much better with a real strategy toward the prevention and management of chronic disease.”

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About BestLifeRewarded Innovations

www.bestliferewardedinnovations.com

BestLifeReward Innovations is passionate about getting Canada healthy. BestLifeRewarded is a proven and innovative platform that combines behaviour modification strategies with exciting incentives to drive action. Our customizable integration offers a range of flexible tools—from turnkey solutions to specialized components that can blend seamlessly with employers’ existing wellness programs.

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About Economic Club of Canada

www.economicclub.ca

The Economic Club of Canada is the podium of record for economic issues affecting Canadians. BestLifeRewarded is one of the Economic Club’s sponsors in the health care space, and in 2016 the two organizations entered into strategic partnership to produce and promote **healthy-economics.com**.

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