

# Business

Rome News-Tribune • SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2004

## Experts: Healthy living good for business

Check your insurance premiums, ask local doctors, monitor state and national political agendas, and the evidence all points to the same conclusion – U.S. health care is in crisis.

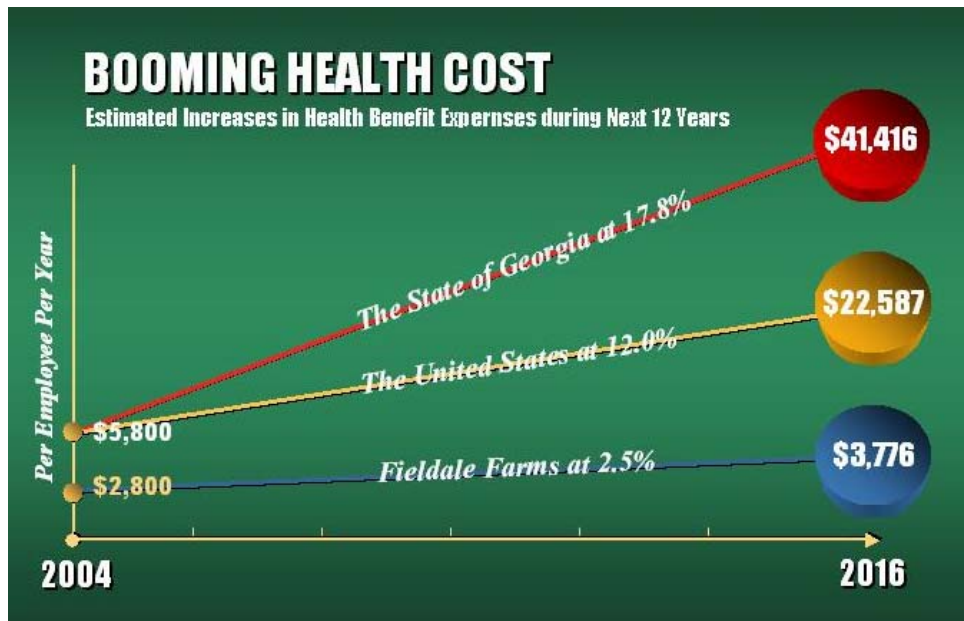
Rome business leaders got a crash course last week on what that means to them and what they can do to begin to improve the situation. In short, the experts say workers must be urged to prevent cardiovascular problems through good nutrition and regular exercise, and business leaders must make rational choices about health benefits and promotions based on science, not trends.

“The only solution is to create a healthy employee population,” said William ‘Robbie’ Burlas, an insurance and benefits expert, at the Healthy Solutions workshop organized by the state’s Cardiovascular Health Initiative.

The average company’s health care benefit expenses per employee are rising at an average rate of 12 percent in the United States and 17.8 percent in Georgia, according to estimates from the Cardiovascular Health Initiative.

If those rates continue, by 2016 the average U.S. company will be paying \$22,587 a year per employee for health benefits, and the average Georgia company will pay \$42,416 per employee – prices that most companies will take drastic measures to avoid, some maybe even dropping health benefits altogether.

The workshop used Fieldale Farms in Baldwin as an example of how promoting good employee health can keep costs low. The company is averaging a 2.5 percent annual increase in health benefits costs, meaning it would



only face a \$3,776 bill per employee in 2016.

“If they focus on cardiovascular health, they’ll achieve the largest benefit on the largest cost,” said Peter A. Townsley, a nationally recognized expert on corporate health promotion.

But it takes serious effort by company leadership, and the effort must point employees toward traditional good nutrition and exercise, not the latest diet gimmick, said Dr. Charles H. Taylor, a prevention physician in Atlanta at last week’s workshop.

“You’re going to have to eat better to feel better and be healthier.” He said. “The rest of it is all quackery and shenanigans.”

The average American’s chances of dying from cardiovascular disease are 50 percent, for men and women alike. Taylor said. “This is really an equal opportunity killer.”

Business owners and managers can do several things to promote better employee health, he said, using a bank office building as an example. The office complex was built with its parking deck two blocks away from the office and its cafeteria two blocks to the other side of the offices. The building also was designed with wide, attractive stair-wells and slow, unattractive elevators to encourage employees to get physical activity. The company also monitors the health value of food distributed in its cafeteria and vending machines.

Townsley suggested companies’ best move for lowering their health costs is to partner with local health care providers and the public health system.

“Business leaders want the cost to go down, but they don’t trust the system to help them do it,” he said.

One key to good cardiovascular health is monitoring cholesterol, Taylor said.

For people with total cholesterol below 150, heart disease is virtually unheard of. But for others, low-density cholesterol (LDL), often called bad cholesterol, should be kept below 130, or below 100 for people with other high risk factors, such as family history of heart disease.

Good nutrition, Taylor said, should consist of a moderation of fat, protein and carbohydrates, with emphasis on low saturated fat intake and good carbs, such as whole grain products and unprocessed fruits and vegetables.

As for exercise, he recommends 24 minutes of aerobic exercise three to five times a week.

“If you do that for three months, you’ll change your resting basal metabolism,” Taylor said. The higher resting metabolism will help with more calories burned, weight loss and higher energy levels.

Health resources and consulting for local businesses are available through the, Cardiovascular Health Initiative, American Cancer Society, Floyd Medical Center’s Occupational Health services, Northwest Georgia Public Health and Redmond Regional Medical Center’s Occupational Health Program.