

Executives hear health message

Spiraling care costs can be managed, expert says

By Steve Lackmeyer, Business Writer

An audience of more than 100 business, health care and insurance executives were advised Tuesday to get aggressively involved in workers' health, or face spiraling insurance costs.

Peter Townsley, who has designed and managed disease prevention programs for Fortune 500 companies in 42 states, said employers can make a difference not just in their employees' lives, but also in the well being of their employees' children, parents and in their community's schools.

"This is about our communities, our health, our lives," said Townsley, who is chief executive of Corporate Health Services. Townsley, appearing at MetroTech as part of Central Oklahoma Turning Point's "Oklahoma Wellness Week," provided one statistic after another to show that heart disease is growing out of control.

Starting with the story of actor and comedian John Candy, who was overweight and smoked and died at age 43, Townsley said America's workplace is full of "John Candys" who need to be identified and brought out of harm's way.

"It needs to be taken seriously," Townsley said. Townsley said nationwide, health care costs are increasing at a rate of 12 percent a year. In Georgia,



Peter Townsley

which started a health initiatives program, that rate was up to 17.8 percent.

Two Georgia employers participating in aggressive health care plans both saw rapid improvements, Townsley said.

Fieldale Farms, based in Baldwin, Ga., began to offer health screenings in 1992, and started programs aimed at helping employee reduce health risks.

By 2004, Townsley said, the company was being hailed as a model for employers looking to reduce their own health care costs. Health care costs per employee went up by about 2.5 percent a year, compared to the average 12 percent nationwide.

TI Automotive, an international auto parts manufacturer, instituted an even more aggressive plan, Townsley said, that was aimed at the company's employees with the highest risk for cardiovascular disease at its Cartersville, Ga., plant.

Screenings were the first step.

"Without data, you're just another person with an opinion," Townsley said.

After the screenings, employees were addressed about the company's health care costs — and the urgency to improve their well being.

Insurance plans were restructured, he said, so employees participating in wellness programs would pay a \$250 deductible. Those who didn't faced a \$1,000 deductible.

The company prohibited smoking at work, offered reimbursements for active gym memberships, changed offerings at vending machines and started a risk reduction program for employees with the highest chance at developing cardiovascular disease.

The company reported 98 percent of employees

participated in the wellness programs. Screenings showed 32 of 280 employees screened were at "high risk." Of those 32 employees, Townsley said, 29 enrolled in an eight-week intervention course led by a licensed dietitian.

The results? Townsley said 12 percent of the company's employees participating in the programs suffered a cholesterol level of 240 or higher (high risk), compared with just 1 percent when the classes were completed. Seven struggled with high blood pressure at the start, compared to just two at the conclusion. An average weight loss of 13 pounds was reported among participants.

TI Automotive is expanding its program to all of its factories across the globe, Townsley said. But he cautioned the program isn't without a cost: both TI Automotive and Fieldale Farms spent the equivalent of 2.5 percent of their health care costs to start and operate the initiatives.

Jackie Jones, director of Central Oklahoma Turning Point, said Townsley's audience included big and small employers, health care professionals and insurance executives. Jones said her organization agrees with Townsley's message.

"Central Oklahoma Turning Point, when they started, decided we would do one seminar a year for businesses about the health of their employees," Jones said. "With the soaring costs of health care and insurance, one of the ways people have learned how we can combat that is to encourage wellness among employees instead of just trying to combat disease after it happens."

Steve Lackmeyer: 475-3230, slackmeyer@oklahoman.com



By the numbers

Peter Townsley, chief executive of Corporate Health Services, provided the following statistics to show that heart disease is growing out of control in the United States:

22%

The percent of Americans surveyed said they had no leisure time physical activity; in Oklahoma, that rate was 27 percent.

22.6%

The percent nationally who said they eat the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables. In Oklahoma only 15.4 percent said they ate the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.

2/3

Portion of Americans who take cholesterol lowering drugs and still die from heart attacks.