

OPIOID ABUSE: HOW COMPANIES CAN COMBAT IT

One Monday in March, Bill, a senior executive at a large corporation, breaks his elbow in a car crash. A doctor prescribes a 30-day supply of an opioid for pain that should subside on its own in much less time than that. Within a week, he's addicted, and at this point, he doesn't even know it. Soon, his home and work lives begin to suffer. His job is at stake ... but can he turn to his employer for help?

It's hard to over dramatize the effect of opioid addiction on American workers and workplaces today. After all, National Safety Council data show that prescription drug abuse affects about 7 in 10 workplaces. More than 15 million employed Americans are estimated to abuse such substances, and in 2006, according to the most recent NSC data available, businesses lost more than \$40 billion in productivity. With that starter prescription of just 30 days' duration, the probability that Bill will still be using that opioid painkiller one year out is 35%.

With that data in mind, it clearly behooves employers to acknowledge and approach the growing opioid epidemic with both alacrity and commitment. But even with good intentions, employers can struggle to get ahead of the problem, observes Sandra Kuhn, National Lead for Behavioral Health at Mercer.

Over the past few years, there has been a "sea change in perspective, toward being more aware of the need for behavioral health support that boosts productivity and reduces absenteeism," Kuhn says. But such perspective only goes so far; it still needs to translate into a series of fundamental strategies that companies can deploy to prevent opioid abuse and to help their employees (and their family members) who nevertheless succumb.

"There's no single solution," Kuhn says. "It will take progress in many different areas to culminate in making things better."



PROMOTING EAPS

The widespread adoption of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) is a bedrock of the effort. EAPs are invaluable to workers who have family members wrestling with addiction or who are in the middle of a crisis themselves. EAPs can help with counseling, with navigating the healthcare system and even with finding the optimum treatment facility. But EAPs are often only as useful as the weight put behind them by the highest levels of the business community.

"It's so critical to have the senior leadership of organizations make a statement to their employees that these issues are important, and then follow that up by ensuring that all of the Employee Assistance Programs and resources for employees are packaged together in a meaningful way — easily available and easy to understand," Kuhn says.

Employer-community partnerships can also play a big role in combating abuse. In Washington State, for example, Mercer has been an instrumental part of one such partnership around prevention, focusing particularly on prescribing practices, says Dr. Mary Kay O'Neill, a Health & Benefits partner and senior clinical consultant at Mercer. "A high percentage of people first encounter opioids through prescriptions from healthcare providers, when they are given a month-long supply of medication for acute procedures that really only need a few days," she says.

The partnership, O'Neill says, has been trying to get providers to think twice before they write prescriptions, if only to limit the amount of painkillers floating around in the community. "We're working with pharmacy benefit managers to change their formulary," she says. "We don't want people to get the message that they are supposed to be taking these medicines for a month. That's a big piece of prevention."



DETECTION, TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY

If prevention efforts fail, systematic detection may succeed. Mercer is working with some of its clients on so-called assemble-to-order products and surveys that allow systematic screening in much the same way a person is tested for hypertension or diabetes.

"This requires the healthcare delivery system to get organized a little bit differently than it has been," O'Neill says. But companies can help make that happen, she says.

"Employers are at the table with carriers and insurance plans, and to an increasing degree, they get in the room with the delivery system providing care for their employees. Businesses are in a much more influential position around this than they usually think. They can request that routine screening be a foundational element of a primary care visit and also ensure employees who need it are able to readily find a good-quality treatment program, and promptly."

Manager training is another vital aspect in the battle against prescription-drug abuse. "Supervisors and managers should be trained on the overall issue but also on the needs of the particular employee coming back to work, the day-to-day, hour-by-hour types of programs that will be available to them to help support recovery," Kuhn advises.

Innovations in technology should offer an assist. For example, texting can be leveraged to expand access to help. Video counseling can replace face-to-face interactions for overwhelmed, far-flung employees. "There are even a few specific vendors who are geared to address addiction by way of online cognitive behavior therapy," Kuhn says. "There is a lot going on in that space that I think will help shape some of the solutions and programs employers offer."

Finally, it's also good for employers to have qualified health and benefits consultants at their side. Mercer, for one, has a "core concentration of individuals with experience in behavioral health treatment delivery," Kuhn notes. "We provide a pretty detailed analysis of the cost drivers and can develop a more specific opioid utilization dashboard so that we can really craft solutions and programs that support what the data are showing us."

Kuhn says employers of any size — and their employees — can benefit from Mercer's work in the field. "Opioid abuse is not just a behavioral health issue, it's not just a medical issue, but a culmination of different things, and we have resources representing those various areas of expertise."



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