Focus On... Obesity

Obesity and corporate America: one Wisconsin employer’s innovative approach

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Introduction
The United States has an obesity epidemic, and Wisconsin’s employers are not sheltered from its impact. Obesity, defined as a BMI greater than 30, has increased dramatically over the past 20 years. In 1991, only four states had obesity prevalence rates greater than 15%. By 2003, all states had rates of at least 15%, 31 states had a rate greater than 20%, and four had a rate greater than 25%.

Employers have an interest in the obesity epidemic, since it has the potential to decrease worker productivity while increasing health care costs. Therefore, some companies have initiated incentive programs to promote wellness and combat obesity. Preliminary data suggests that well-designed programs can be effective.

Recognizing that obesity is a public health issue, Wisconsin has set goals for employers, health plans, and health providers to actively address obesity management. The Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Workgroup (WINPAW) has identified key objectives related to obesity management in Wisconsin (Table 1).

Quad/Graphics
Quad/Graphics is the world’s largest privately held printer and the third largest printer in the world. Founded in 1971 in Pewaukee, Wis, the company has grown rapidly and today has facilities in seven states and more than 12,000 employees, 10,000 of whom are located in Wisconsin. In 2004, total costs for the health care plan were $62 million for 23,807 member lives.

The corporation is self-insured for medical benefits. The foundation of their health care plan is a series of single and multi-specialty primary care clinics owned by Quad/Graphics and managed by Quad/Med as a wholly owned subsidiary. The clinics provide health care services to Quad/Graphics’s employees and dependents. There are three Quad/Med primary care clinics in southeastern Wisconsin. An additional primary care clinic is located in the Saratoga Springs, NY plant. In 2004, there were 59,000 health professional visits.

Health care services offered through Quad/Med include family medicine, pediatrics, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, dermatology, orthopedics, otolaryngology, primary dental care, optometry, and psychological counseling. Additional services provided on-site through Quad/Med include pharmacy, nutritional counseling, physical therapy and rehabilitation, and full service fitness centers for individual and group physical fitness activities.

Quad/Med Obesity Data
In response to rising state and national obesity rates, Quad/Med decided to analyze health data from its electronic medical chart database to determine if obesity was a significant problem in the employees and dependents. Prevalence data was extracted from two Quad/Med studies completed in 2004. The first was a chart audit on well child visits. The charts included Body Mass Index (BMI) data, which was compared to BMI data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) growth charts. The data showed that 19.4% of all children were obese (>95th percentile based on CDC growth charts) and an additional 15% were at risk for obesity (between 85th and 95th percentile). In total, fully one third of all children had significant weight problems. The second study investigated low back pain, a frequent and costly disorder seen in the Quad/Med clinics. The study focused on treatment, but included analysis of patient characteristics and BMI. The data showed that 19.4% of all children were obese (>95th percentile based on CDC growth charts) and an additional 15% were at risk for obesity (between 85th and 95th percentile). In total, fully one third of all children had significant weight problems.

After establishing that weight problems were prevalent in children...
and adults, Quad/Med next evaluated costs associated with obesity. Medical and prescription claims data were collected for a sample of employees, spouses, and dependents who had been seen in the Quad/Med clinics in 2003 or 2004. BMI values for these patients were extracted from Quad/Med’s electronic medical records.

Table 1. Selected WINPAW- Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Workgroup Goals

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<td>By 2007, 10 schools, 10 worksites, and 10 communities will be recognized for their achievements in promoting and supporting a healthy lifestyle.</td>
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<td>By 2006, increase the proportion of health care professionals that incorporate BMI as a screening tool to assess overweight and obesity among children and adults.</td>
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<td>By 2008, the major health plans and Wisconsin Medicaid will partner with WINPAW to identify recommendations to improve prevention, assessment, and management of overweight and obesity for children and adults.</td>
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<td>By 2010, increase the number of health insurance providers for the state government, university system, and major private businesses that provide coverage for prevention, assessment, and management of overweight and obesity for children and adults.</td>
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<td>By 2008, at least one health care system will implement and evaluate an intervention to gather evidence that prevention (coverage and self-care) services are cost effective for both the health care system and employer, and impact obesity and related chronic disease.</td>
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<tr>
<td>By 2009, all of the major health care plans and Wisconsin Medicaid will implement the expert panel guidelines for the prevention, assessment, and management of overweight and obesity for children and adults.</td>
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<td>By 2010, increase the number of Wisconsin’s major employers that offer benefits packages and workplace health promotion programs that incorporate healthy eating and physical activity.</td>
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Quad/Graphics Multifaceted Approach to Obesity

Clinical Preventive Services
Quad/Med increased its emphasis on primary and secondary prevention. The primary care physicians and mid-level health care professionals were given in-service training concerning preventive services and use of in-house dietary consulting teams and fitness programs. Procedures are being developed to assure that BMI and “exercise status” are included on each patient visit and approached by providers as a vital sign. Quad/Med is developing clinical tools to assess patient’s readiness to begin an exercise program, set specific exercise goals and monitor patient participation. This program is patterned on smoking cessation programs and will compliment existing weight loss programs.

Another example of our in-house efforts is “Healthy Weighs,” a program designed to promote weight control and fitness for adults. It is taught by the Dietary and Fitness staff and is comprised of once-a-week, one-hour classes for 10 weeks combined with group consultation. Program features include use of food diaries, nutritional analysis, personalized weight loss and exercise plans, and lifestyle change counseling. This program is available to all Quad/Graphics employees and dependents. Quad/Med also encourages health care professionals to refer patients (employees and dependents) to these programs. In program follow-up evaluations, attendees have sited three main influences in their decision to participate in Healthy Weighs: convenience of work location, the need for a structured program, and group support. The information most frequently identified as being helpful was education on portion control.

“Way to Go Kids!” is a commercially available program designed to help parents assist their children in managing their weight through building lifelong, healthy attitudes about food and fitness. It was initiated in 2002. The program is designed for children 9-13 years old and requires
participation of at least 1 parent at all classes. The session consists of eight classes, one per week. It is taught by Quad/Med Dietary and Fitness Staff and highlights family lifestyle change, fun and informative nutrition classes, a variety of fun fitness activities, and preparing healthy snacks. This program is open to all employees and dependents. It does not require medical referral.

“Quad Families Investing Together” (QFIT) is a new program to address pediatric obesity. The pediatric primary care professionals and key staff involved with Way to Go Kids felt that a more intensive program was needed to manage children who already met obesity criteria. The program will offer treatment for pediatric obesity on an individual level. QFIT links the resources of dietary, fitness, primary care, and counseling through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

One of the key premises of QFIT is that pediatric obesity is often the result of family interactions and environment. Often the health behaviors in the entire family need to be addressed in order to help the child lose weight or prevent further weight gain.

Entry into the QFIT programs begins through a referral from a primary care professional. The patient/family is given materials explaining the program and is then asked to complete a readiness-for-change questionnaire. Both parents and the child (if over age 11) are asked to complete this readiness assessment. The family then meets with a Quad/Med pediatric nurse practitioner, who discusses the program thoroughly. If it is determined that the family and child are ready to address the obesity problem (often parents are also overweight), the family is enrolled.

The nurse practitioner works as a central case manager and facilitates medical evaluation, short- and long-term goal setting, and working relationships for the family with the fitness staff, dieticians, and in-house EAP counselors. The EAP counsel-
ors involved with the program have specialized training in motivational interviewing and behavioral change. Length of time and number of appointments with staff in the program is not limited.

Employee Benefits Wellness Incentive Program: Lean You
Quad/Graphics has implemented a company-wide wellness incentive program called “Lean You” to further promote and reward healthy lifestyles. Available to all employees, participants can earn up to $250 tax free for healthy lifestyle management. During benefits enrollment in the 4th quarter of 2004, 2429 employees signed up to participate. Of the enrollees, 37% are females and 63% males, reflecting the employee ratio at Quad/Graphics.

The goals of the wellness incentive program are to (1) increase the amount and frequency of physical activity of employees; (2) provide incentive for weight loss; (3) provide individual incentive to employees with hypertension, diabetes, and high cholesterol to reach target benchmarks; (4) promote tobacco-free behaviors; and (5) reward employees who at baseline are disease free, normal weight, and exercise regularly. To qualify for the full amount of incentive money, enrollees must meet the following criteria:

1. Be tobacco free by July 1 of enrollment year.
2. Be at or reach a BMI of <27 or lose 10% of their body weight in one year (whichever is less).
3. Exercise a minimum of three times a week for a duration of 30 minutes each time (does not have to be at Quad/Graphics fitness center).
4. Have a blood pressure controlled under 135/85, LDL cholesterol less than 130, and normal glucose (or, if diabetic, at goal A1C).
5. Complete an annual preventive health exam with a primary care professional and have that person sign off that all health maintenance is up-to-date.

To help employees reach their goals, Quad/Graphics provides fitness centers and/or subsidized health club memberships where fitness centers are not on site, dietary consults and group classes, cholesterol and weight loss seminars, and subsidizes Weight Watchers. Quad/Graphics also provides smoking cessation classes and subsidizes the cost of over-the-counter nicotine patch and gum, and provides prescription coverage for bupropion. Open access to primary care and pre-ventive exams and tests (mammogram, pap, colonoscopy, lipid panel, immunizations, etc.) are also covered by the health plan.

Quad/Med plans to perform extensive analysis of data collected in the “Lean You” project. Preliminary data on participants show 45.7% are normal weight, 22.3% are overweight and 32% are obese. A small number of the enrollees—11.5%—were tobacco users at enrollment and 79.6% of the tobacco users plan to quit before July. All indicated they would use Quad resources for smoking cessation.

Since the initiation of “Lean You,” use of fitness centers has increased dramatically in all 7 plants. Increases range from 31% to 277%, with four plants recording increases from 30% to 45% and three plants increasing from 118% to 277%. Future data analysis will include health care cost and utilization for participants. Employee dependents may be included in future “Lean You” programs. Long-term follow-up of enrollees will answer the following questions:

1. Can health behavior lifestyle changes be maintained?
2. What are the long-term health care costs of enrollees vs employees who choose not to enroll?
3. Are there regional differences in ability to change lifestyle behaviors? Future interventions can be customized to regional and plant location differences.

Conclusions
As corporations across America struggle with solutions to obesity, Quad/Graphics is making a long-term investment in its employees. It is hoped that the incentive program will prevent employees from gaining weight and adopting sedentary lifestyles as they age, as well as move current employees who are not at normal weight to healthier lifestyles and prevent future co-morbid conditions. For employees who already have developed chronic health conditions related to obesity, regular successful completion of the wellness incentive program may reverse some aspects of their disease and, at minimum, reward employees for active participation in management of their blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol. Quad/Graphics hopes that rewarding employees who achieve the goals with $250 each year will help to control the health care cost trend.

The health of employers is intimately tied to the health of their employees. Acknowledging this, Quad/Graphics has developed targeted programs to complement their comprehensive preventive medical services. It is our hope that linking employee incentives, focused wellness programs and primary care services will result in long-term health improvements and reduction in medical costs related to obesity.

References
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