

Rx FOR AILING EMPLOYEES

The best prescription for soaring health care costs is getting workers to follow doctors' orders.

POLITICS ASIDE, one obvious way to slow the soaring cost of health care is to get people to swallow their pills. It sounds simple, but medical experts say that patients' failure to take prescription medications as directed costs some \$300 billion a year in emergency-room visits, in-patient hospital care, and extra visits to doctors' offices. Growing numbers of employers, medical groups, and insurers agree that convincing patients to adhere to the treatment plans prescribed by their physicians is a key way to rein in health care costs.

To promote the value of patient adherence, many organizations have developed programs to show employees and patients that following their doctors' orders will improve both their health and the quality of their lives.

Why don't people take their medications? Carelessness, laziness, and just plain forgetfulness are some of the reasons. Another is the erroneous belief that once

a person begins to feel better, the need for regular medication is over. Cost is another crucial factor. But one study found that even with health plans where the drugs are free, rates of non-adherence were nearly 40%. And it's not just an American problem: The World Health Organization reports that the average medication compliance rate in developed countries is only 50%.

Patients who follow their medication regimens obviously enjoy better health and need less medical attention than those who don't, but the question that's always raised is whether the costs outweigh the savings. A newly released three-year study by CVS Caremark has the definitive answer. After analyzing the pharmacy and medical claims of 135,000 patients with four chronic ailments—congestive heart

50%

**MEDICATION COMPLIANCE RATE
IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES**

Source: World Health Organization

failure, diabetes, hypertension, and dyslipidemia (high cholesterol)—CVS Caremark researchers found that those who took their medications saved the health care system \$1,250 to \$8,000 annually.

Dr. Troyen A. Brennan, co-author of the study and executive vice president and chief medical officer at CVS Caremark, adds this: Although patients who fol-

low doctors' orders spend as much as \$1,000 more on drugs each year, "their overall health care costs are considerably lower." The availability of cheaper generic substitutes for widely used prescription drugs is also a powerful incentive for patients to follow physicians' recommendations, says Dr. Brennan. And so, he adds, is the fact that employers and insurers are getting the message that programs to promote medication compliance pay big dividends.

"Drugs don't work on people who don't take them," says Sean Sullivan, president and CEO of the Institute for Health and Productivity Management (IHPM), which helps companies deal with the rising cost of health care. Research reported by IHPM estimates that patients' non-adherence to prescription drugs results in 4 million avoidable hospital stays and the loss of 20 million workdays a year—a huge productivity loss.

Harvard economist David Cutler, another believer, is convinced that patient adherence should be a top priority in health care programs. There are proven screening and assessment tools to target patients who are at the greatest risk for non-adherence, he says in a recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. That being the case, he urges employers, insurers, and physicians to adopt the incentives and support systems needed to keep adherence rates moving in the right direction. ●



START ADHERENCE

We know adherence works. We've done the research to show that those who are adherent to prescribed medications have lower health care costs, offsetting their increased pharmacy cost by as much as 13 to 1. Just as important, we know how to help people become adherent. We've invested in the research, resources, technology and staff to reach more of your members more effectively than any other pharmacy provider. For a copy of our landmark study and more information on how we can get you started on improving your population's adherence, contact Jim Fowler, Vice President, at (203) 778-1533 or Jim.Fowler@caremark.com.

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