

THE ROAD TO wellville

BY KAREN CHILDRESS

Creating a healthy culture for your staff isn't all that difficult.

Every day in offices all around the country, physicians encourage their patients to maintain a healthy weight, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, stop smoking, and manage stress. So, what message might it send to patients if they look around their doctor's office and see an overweight medical assistant, a box of doughnuts on the counter, front office staff rolling around in their chairs instead of standing up to retrieve charts, and a stressed-out practice manager standing outside smoking a cigarette? In such situations, patients get a mixed message.

Setting a good example for patients is an excellent reason—but certainly not the only reason—to create a healthy culture among your office staff. Employees who take care of themselves physically have more energy, higher levels of productivity, and improved morale. Healthy employees miss work less often and file fewer health insurance claims. If you'd like to launch a voluntary workplace wellness initiative in your practice (or expand

the one you already have) here are some ideas to help you get started.

LET'S GET MOVING

Regular exercise helps control weight, keeps bones strong, reduces stress, and increases self-esteem. Assuming individuals in your office are medically well enough to participate in an exercise program, there's virtually no downside to promoting fitness among employees.

Mark English is the director of Healthcare Wellness Partnerships at Curves International in Waco, Texas. Curves (www.curves.com) is a women-only, 30-minute fitness center with locations nationwide. English says practice managers should contact their group's health insurance carrier to find out about wellness benefits that may be covered under their plan. If benefits in this area are skimpy, speak up. "Demand by the consumer is important," says English. "If health plans have enough consumer interest for a reimbursement or

incentive program, ... they will address the demand." If your plan includes a flexible spending account, chances are good that those funds can be used for wellness programs.

Whether wellness programs are included in your group insurance plan or not, there are many ways to encourage employees to be physically active. One is to subsidize or pay for the cost of a gym membership. Curves spokeswoman Becky Frusher suggests practice managers approach the owner of one of the more than 8,000 Curves locations and ask about a group discount. Each location is independently operated, and Frusher says most franchise owners are very receptive to these arrangements. Other large health clubs, such as Gold's Gym, Bally Total Fitness, and 24 Hour Fitness, also offer corporate wellness and membership programs.

If your area doesn't have a fitness center or gym, see if a local recreation department offers ongoing fitness classes. Or, hire a



personal trainer or yoga teacher to come to the office after hours two or three days each week to work with staff as a group. Also, consider the possibility of offering a slightly extended paid lunch hour for employees who want to spend 15-30 minutes of their break taking a brisk walk.

English says employers should consider offering a reward or incentive program to encourage staff members to exercise regularly. "What's important is ongoing motivation," he says, noting that starting a fitness program is easy, but sticking with it can be a challenge. Don't assume you know what your employees might want in the way of an incentive program. "Find out what's attractive to your employees," adds English. Would your staff be motivated by an ongoing contest or paid time off for achieving goals like pounds lost or number of gym visits? Or, would your staff be more interested in reimbursement for health club membership fees?

A NOURISHING PLACE TO WORK

A lot of eating happens during work hours. Many people don't even eat breakfast until midmorning; and then there's lunch, often followed by a snack to get you through the busy afternoon. You can encourage employ-

ees to explore healthy, nutritious eating in a variety of ways. To start, here are five:

- **"Just say no" to having junk food in the office.** You know the kind—salty delicacies in small bags, sodas packed with sugar (or worse, artificial sweeteners), the ever-present box of pastries, and "food" that has been processed beyond the point of being recognizable as actual food. If your practice has a vending machine, request that it be stocked with healthier choices (nuts, fruit, pretzels, whole grain items). If you have drug reps stopping by with treats and lunches, let them know that the staff prefers nutritionally sound offerings.

- **Skip the cake and cookies at staff meetings and employee birthdays.** Instead, order in a variety of salads, including fresh fruit salad for dessert.

- **Invite the dietician or nutritionist from your affiliate hospital (or hire a private one) to make a lunch-hour presentation on healthy eating and answer questions from staff.**

- **Hold a quarterly potluck where each staff member brings in a healthy dish to share for lunch, along with their recipes to exchange.**

- **Skip the year-end holiday dinner or luncheon.** Instead, invest what you would

normally spend at an upscale restaurant in a group excursion to a local day spa. A massage, a facial, or a manicure or a pedicure for each employee might end up costing a bit more than a meal, but the benefits are longer-lasting. If the men in your practice balk at the spa idea (although many spas now offer a "gentleman's facial" and other services for men), offer them an alternative, such as a gift certificate.

WEIGHTY MATTERS

According to The Obesity Society (www.obesity.org), 64 percent of adults in this country are either overweight or obese. Given this staggering statistic, the odds are good that there are at least a handful of people in your practice who would like to drop a few pounds. In addition to encouraging healthy eating in the office (a good idea even for staff members who don't struggle with their weight), you can support employees who are serious about losing weight by making resources available.

Weight Watchers (www.weightwatchers.com) is one highly effective weight loss program that has been around for more than 40 years. It offers support meetings in locations all around the country, online programs for the technically inclined, and a Weight Watchers at Work program (typically for

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groups of 20 or more). Practices with employees interested in losing those extra pounds stand to benefit financially by helping those employees achieve and maintain a healthy weight. According to the Weight Watchers Website, “For every \$100 spent in annual health-care costs on a healthy-weight employee, employers spend 13.8 percent more on an overweight employee and 37.7 percent more on an obese employee.”

THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING

According to the American Lung Association’s Website, “Smoking costs the United States approximately \$97.2 billion each year in healthcare costs and lost productivity.” That’s *billion*, with a B. Find out if your employee health plan covers smoking cessation medications, aids such as nicotine patches and gum, or counseling to help employees stop smoking. If these items are covered, make sure employees who wish to stop smoking are aware of that benefit. Otherwise, consider sharing in the cost of a smoking cessation program or reimbursing employees for the expenses once they’ve been smoke-free for an agreed upon period of time.

If you have employees in your practice who still smoke and want to stop, here are four online resources to look into:

- www.lungusa.org—The American Lung Association offers Freedom From Smoking, a free, online smoking cessation program. Click on the “Quit Smoking” link at the association’s Website.
- www.endsmoking.org—Professional Assisted Cessation Therapy (PACT) offers a



free, downloadable 40-page guide on how to use a smoking cessation program in your office.

- www.americanheart.org—The American Heart Association has extensive information on smoking and cardiovascular disease.
- www.smokenders.com—SmokEnders offers courses and kits to help smokers stop, plus statistics on the cost of smoking in the workplace.

CHECK THE STRESS


Less measurable than trips to the gym or a few pounds lost, but no less important for good health, is stress management. Preventive medicine specialist Arlene Noodleman, M.D., and her husband, dermatologist Rick Noodleman, M.D., own and operate Age Defy Dermatology & Wellness in Campbell, Calif. Through their recently opened Medi-Spa and Wellness Center, the practice promotes an array of stress-reduction services for patients that staff can access at greatly reduced rates, or even

for free. They regularly offer an eight-week course in mindfulness-based stress reduction. “It’s about becoming more present and looking at things from a more neutral stance,” says Dr. Arlene Noodleman. “Staff pays a fraction of the cost of the course. Everything we do for patients, the staff can benefit from too.”

In addition, the Noodlemans have experts from the Institute of HeartMath teach their staff how to use the EmWave Personal Stress Reliever (www.heartmath.com) and have purchased the handheld feedback devices for all of their employees. They also use a simple, powerful technique regularly in the office—at the

beginning of staff meetings, for example—designed to help everyone center, focus, and relax. “The technique gets you out of the reactive mode,” says Dr. Noodleman.

ENCOURAGE, DON'T DEMAND

You may have staff members who are significantly overweight but who are just not interested in (or ready for yet) a weight loss effort or employees who smoke but aren’t motivated to stop now. And, let’s face it, going to the gym just doesn’t appeal to everyone. The reality is that you can’t force employees to change their lifestyles. Encourage participation in your workplace wellness initiative, but don’t demand it. Pushing too hard on employees who aren’t ready to change won’t accomplish much and may do more harm than good. Offer gentle support and set a good example. Others will follow your lead when they’re ready. 

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