

Patient-focused Wellness Better Health Care at Lower Costs

By Kenneth A. Camp

The American health care delivery system yields tremendous outcomes when illness strikes. However, the system is made less effective by two significant factors.

First, not enough caregiver effort is directed at avoiding long-term, debilitating conditions. In a factory, or just in one's home, preventive maintenance cuts cost and increases "up-time." The same is true with the human body where up-time means length and quality of life. Yet the typical health care reimbursement system spends more on fixing disease than avoiding it.

Second, requirements of "keeping score" add significant cost and frustrate caregivers and patients. Beyond the need to maintain accurate medical records, time spent completing complex reimbursement paperwork reduces a physician's time spent with patients. Many physicians reported that administrative demands limit the average time with a patient to six to eight minutes. Even more important, it increases the likelihood physicians will focus more on patients "getting well" than "being well."

The primary goal of physicians is to take care of patients and to keep them well. The primary goal of patients is to get well as quickly as possible. These are the value-added elements. What neither cares about is anything that conflicts with these goals. As employers, we care about having employees and their families lead longer, healthier and more productive lives – and the total cost of doing so.

Improving the process

Hillenbrand has a record of applying lean business practices to eliminate waste, improve quality and increase operational effectiveness. When we began to evaluate the health care experiences of our employees, it became painfully obvious the processes were burdened with non-value added elements that, if eliminated, would dramatically improve the entire process while reducing overall costs.

The first step was to create health screening fairs where we used \$50 gift cards to entice people to discover if they had undiagnosed chronic diseases or precursors that could reduce quality and length of life.

The second step was examining the non-value added steps of a doctor's visit. Usually, the sick patient had to wait for an appointment and then sit in a crowded waiting room for far too long. When they finally saw the doctor, it was only for a few minutes because demands of the paperwork-based bureaucracy limited the doctor's time. If the patient received a prescription, the cycle started all over again at the pharmacy. This process also included doctor's office and pharmacy co-pays and confusing insurance paperwork. There had to be a better way.

Our biggest step was to partner with Novia CareClinics to build the Hillenbrand Health and Wellness Center, a company-owned facility where employees and their families go to get well quickly and to learn how to remain healthy.



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Best practices in place

At the center, patients are able to see a doctor and receive generic medications on-site without ever opening their wallets. Patient satisfaction has increased through extended office hours from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., convenient 24/7 online and phone scheduling and 20- and 40-minute appointments. Patients no longer are tempted to "see if the illness goes away."

The staff is carefully recruited for medical knowledge, friendliness and overall fit with our company philosophy of patient-oriented health care. The environment is attractive, professional and open with no barriers between medical staff and patients. As a result, the staff expresses high levels of satisfaction because they are able to practice medicine instead of administration. Patients report that they feel "cared for" and "cared about."

Aside from getting people healthy, the staff focuses on keeping people healthy by identifying potentially life-altering medical conditions early so they do not escalate into costly disasters. Occupational health specialists also assess patients and can design new processes in the workplace to prevent repeat or permanent injuries. Although only the medical staff can ever know about a patient's medical condition and history, many employees have volunteered that the entire process has helped save or improve their lives. That really feels good.

Our key learning is that the health care debate needs less debating and more action. Companies can do things government will never be able to do because we can make decisions without political implications, and we can act quickly and adjust rapidly to new cycles of learning. Most importantly, we can make the lives of our employees and their families better while improving retention and reducing cost.

We are now building a second Wellness Center in another state because this new process works. Ironically, in many ways we're going back to the way medicine once was. You can do the same.

INFORMATION LINK

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