

Health & Wellness Forum draws big crowd

By Bill Settlemyer

Charleston Regional Business Journal 9/22/2003

On Friday, September 12, the *Business Journal* hosted The Business Forum on Workplace and Community Health & Wellness. Over 200 people attended the event, and the region's corporate, medical, insurance and civic communities were all well represented.

Our keynote speaker was Dr. David Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America. His presentation was both shocking and encouraging. The shock came from charts and graphs showing the rapid growth in the cost of employer group health insurance and the growth in the total cost of medical care as a percentage of the nation's gross domestic product. Dr. Hunnicutt showed us a series of maps of the U.S. charting the spread of obesity and (no surprise) the almost parallel growth of diabetes to epidemic proportions.

No question about it—health care costs *are* out of control with no end in sight unless we change our ways. One solution is to make sure that group health plans are structured to require employees to share in the cost of their care. The idea is to teach employees how to be knowledgeable participants in managing their health and their utilization of the health care system.

But cost sharing alone won't stop runaway health care costs. On a more positive note, Dr. Hunnicutt presented persuasive evidence that significant lifestyle changes on the part of employees can dramatically reduce the frequency and magnitude of budget-busting group health insurance claims. The trick is to implement a carefully structured company wellness program that provides the tools, the knowledge and the right incentives to motivate employees to manage their own health and medical care effectively. Good intentions without a good plan just won't do the job.

Meanwhile, in the community...

Due to the impact of Medicare, Medicaid and emergency room-based care for the uninsured, it's not enough just to work within the corporate world. We need to have a strategy for giving everyone in our community the knowledge, tools and motivation to take charge of their personal health. And we have to recognize that every person who doesn't have access to basic preventive health care and assistance with disease management is a candidate to become a very expensive burden on our health care and health insurance systems.

In only a half a day, we learned a great deal about what needs to be done and what *can* be done. Look for more coverage of these vital issues in future editions of the *Business Journal*.