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Published Wednesday, September 17, 2003

Workplace wellness

Safety and health conference stresses business interests

Last modified at 12:16 a.m. on Wednesday, September 17, 2003

By **Mike Bockoven**

mbockoven@theindependent.com

While safety is often touted as an integral part of the workplace, the conventional wisdom on employee health isn't seen as a bottom line issue right now, Dr. David Hunnicutt said.

That is about to change.

"Health will be the heartbeat of business in the next 10 years," said Hunnicutt, president of the Wellness Councils of America. "In this day and age, with employees getting older, I'd say health and safety will run the business."

Hunnicutt was the keynote speaker at the first Safety and Worksite Wellness Conference, hosted by Well Workplace Nebraska and Great Plains Safety and Health Organization.

The statewide conference, which included management, committee leaders, employees and others, was held Tuesday at the Interstate Holiday Inn in Grand Island.

Janee Montgomery, with Well Workplace Nebraska, said the event was successful in its first year, both in numbers and the diversity from the business world who were interested in wellness and safety in the workplace.

"We're close to 100 participants this year, which is great for a first-year event," she said. "Basically, we have anyone who is in charge of workplace safety at this conference."

Hunnicutt's speech focused on what wellness and safety are, what they lead to, and the four things businesses should consider in maintaining a healthier workforce.

"The good news is with some little things, you can move forward and be more healthy," he said. "Seven out of 10 reasons people get sick or hurt are preventable."

The four aspects of health and wellness Hunnicutt recommends that businesses look at are ergonomics, or preventing injuries related to repetitive motion, fatigue, physical activity and weight of employees.

Fatigue, especially, he said, is a topic that often gets him "laughed out of the room," until he shows some pretty striking statistics about it.

"Those who work long hours are seen as warriors. They are sought after," Hunnicutt said. "What a lot of people don't know is when someone is sleep deprived, it's like being at a .15 blood alcohol level. It's like having nine beers and then showing up and saying, 'I love work!'"

Physical activity and weight are two of the biggest problems not just facing the workplace, but facing the United States as a whole, he said.

It continues to a prolonged "compression of morbidity," or the amount of time employees are sick, to a large degree.

In addition, he said the United States is facing an epidemic of muscular and skeletal problems because of inactivity and high-calorie diets.

The answer, he said, can start in the workplace and lead to better lives for employees.

"It doesn't have to be bad. It can be walking 30 minutes a day and eating 100 less calories a day," he said. "One thing you can do is give employees pedometers. I got a pedometer and I wear it religiously. That means 10,000 steps a day and if I don't get it, I have to keep moving."

Hunnicutt also mentioned that fast food in today's breakneck work schedule is unavoidable.

What should be done, he said, is employees should learn to eat smaller portions of fast food, even if it means "looking strange."

In the end, be it the workplace or at home, paying attention to lifestyle is 50 percent of what helps keep people healthy, Hunnicutt said. Pay attention and act on information, and healthiness will be an attainable goal.

"You don't have to be a health Nazi to live a long life," he said. "You don't have to wake up and eat nothing but sprouts and run 25 miles like an antelope. You do have to pay attention to your lifestyle."