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Guest Column: How COVID-19 Changed Employers' Approach to Health Care Forever

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Two years after the first COVID-19 shutdowns in the United States, employers are still feeling the effects of the pandemic in their employee populations, their work environment and their health care costs.

To put it simply, the way that employers and employees interact with the health care industry has forever changed. Just as technology and flexibility became a necessity in everyday life, these adjustments too became integral to the health care experience. Together, health care entities and employers gleaned lessons from the challenges that the pandemic posed that have informed the way that both parties need to approach their benefit offerings and solutions going forward.

See Employees as People First

Employers realized that their employees relied on them for more than professional needs during the pandemic—and that trend isn't going away. Employers need to see their employees as their whole selves, with financial, physical, mental and emotional needs that need to be addressed in order for them to feel secure and productive in their role.

Employers need to find opportunities to address social determinants of health within their employee population. What demographics, psychographics or socioeconomic factors are affecting their specific employees? We've seen creative employers provide childcare assistance, for example, or make changes to sick leave to better support their employees.

Create Stronger Partnerships between Healthcare and Business

Before the pandemic, many employers thought of their benefits partnerships in regard to which carrier they worked with. COVID-19 forced employers to look outside of this lens and open their eyes to provider systems in their area. Suddenly, their employees needed assistance interacting with their providers. Did they have access to telehealth? Who should they call if they thought they may have been exposed to the COVID-19 virus? Which providers could they go to for testing or high-quality, low-cost care?

Employers who sought out deeper partnerships with provider systems have seen the impact that this has had on their employee population's health. Whether they are able to now provide access to on-site care or preferred care at multiple locations that best fit their employees' needs, the results are proven—strong relationships between businesses and the health care industry create more innovative solutions and result in better employee health outcomes.

Encourage Participation in Healthcare for Preventive Care

Many employees skipped their preventive care appointments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitals were overrun with infected patients, staff were overworked and many routine appointments (including elective surgeries) were postponed to accommodate the changing landscape of health care. This created both a backlog of care activities for the health care industry, as well as a widening of gaps in care for employees, from mental health interventions to detecting chronic conditions at an early stage.

Employers learned that they needed to actively encourage their employees to resume their preventive care efforts. Today, employers are tasked with educating employees on the benefits of preventive care, assisting them with finding a primary care provider and providing resources that can help them make better health care decisions. We have even seen some employers provide mobile screenings at their work sites to encourage routine care!

Key Takeaways

The COVID-19 pandemic taught our society a number of lessons, but one of biggest takeaways for employers and the health care industry was the adjustments they needed to make to positively impact employee health. Health care is not going back to "normal." Forward-thinking employers should take note of industry-wide changes and implement innovative strategies to better care for their employees and control health care costs.