

## **Private Sector's Experience in Prevention and Wellness Can Benefit Health Reform**

As the latest employment statistics confirm, our economy continues to struggle. Policy-makers must grapple with the difficult business of helping consumers and businesses alike stay afloat. Collectively, Americans have adopted a more cautious approach—and this new mindset has brought new and increased scrutiny to every sector of the economy. In the case of health care, it has highlighted, in stark relief, the large and increasing burden of health care spending on our pocketbooks.

The fact is, health care spending currently accounts for 16 percent of America's gross domestic product. At the current pace, one out of every five dollars will be spent on health care by 2015. This state of affairs is unsustainable.

So what drives health care spending? In the U.S., chronic disease, such as cancer, obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, accounts for fully 75 percent of health care spending.

Virtually everyone agrees: since 70 percent of chronic disease is preventable or reversible, we can and must do more to promote wellness and prevention. A Trust for America's Health report found that spending \$10 a year per person on chronic disease prevention programs would save the United States more than \$16 billion annually within five years.

But moving beyond this agreement has proven to be a sticking point in the ongoing health care reform debate. What does promoting wellness and prevention look like, and how do we know what will and will not work? How do we move from a society that focuses on sickness and death to one that emphasizes health and well-being?

The fact is, the private sector has a wealth of experience already incorporating many of the prevention and wellness proposals under consideration into practice. The value of the programs is in their ability to improve health status of the population, improve productivity, and lower costs. The programs typically deliver a two to one return on investment and five to 12 percent medical cost savings.

Congress should look and learn from these programs—both the successful and the unsuccessful—as it hammers out the specific components of health care reform legislation.

For example, one proposal under consideration by the Senate Finance Committee is to capitalize on initiatives such as smoking cessation and nutrition programs that have demonstrated success in changing and supporting healthy lifestyle choices. At my company, CIGNA, we have developed a smoking cessation coaching program that also helps connect our individual customers to other services to help them quit smoking. Through this program, our participants have been six times more successful at quitting smoking than the general population.

This is important: people who smoke are more likely to develop lung cancer, emphysema, and other costly diseases. Getting one smoker to kick the habit for good can save the health care system more than \$1,600 in annual medical costs. From both a fiscal and an ethical standpoint, it

makes sense that health care reform efforts would include measures that help replicate successful smoking cessation programs.

Other proposals call for implementing innovative, evidence-based prevention and wellness programs at the local level that employ best practices. Experience shows that this approach can bring about real and measurable results; coaching and other interventions that help shift individuals from the high category of dangerous risk combinations to the low category can save more than \$4,000 in annual costs. Toward that end, at CIGNA we have developed intensive on-site group coaching programs targeted at improving coronary and metabolic health—in other words, patients with metabolic syndrome or diagnosed diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease—that have been shown to help patients significantly lower cholesterol, improve their glucose levels, and lose weight in just 30 days.

The point is—there are many positive studies and a wealth of private-sector experience demonstrating how targeted approaches to prevention and wellness can work and prove cost-effective. However, Congress needs to recognize and continue to incorporate these innovative private sector experiences when evaluating alternative health care policies. As a result and most importantly, the American taxpayer and all consumers of health care will benefit from these real world experiences.

We can save money and lives by making prevention and wellness a key part of comprehensive health reform; it has worked in the private sector and can work across the health care system, too.