

Business Insurance PERSPECTIVE

Cardiac program helps to save plant, improves employees' overall health

By JOANNE WOJCIK

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.—A cardiac disease management program that enlisted the support of the local physician community is responsible for resuscitating a Cartersville, Ga., auto parts plant about to be shut down.

"This was a plant that was slated to close. Some of the work was headed for Mexico. The rest was going to China," said Terri Forman, benefits manager for Warren, Mich.-based TI Automotive, during a session at the Institute for Health and Productivity Management's seventh annual international conference.

The plant's health care costs were increasing at a 12% annual clip, with costs per employee projected to surge to \$25,140 by 2016, Ms.

Forman said.

Under the cardiac care program, all employees were required to undergo lipid screenings at the plant. If their cholesterol was found to be at unhealthy levels, they were instructed to make changes in their diet and to exercise. After eight weeks, employees whose cholesterol levels weren't lowered by diet and exercise were referred to their physicians for medical intervention. However, even in those cases, employees were dissuaded from relying primarily on medication to control their cholesterol.

"The easy thing to do is to pop a pill, but it may not be the necessary thing to do," Ms. Forman said.

The program also allowed no exceptions for employees who blamed their high cholesterol on heredity.

"They have a history of eating poorly, as did their parents and their grandparents," she said, maintaining that the only permanent solution to their cholesterol problems was to make lifestyle changes. "We treat it almost as if they have an allergy to cholesterol," she said.

When some employees came to her complaining that their doctors disagreed with the company's findings, Ms. Forman approached the doctors herself and explained the direness of the situation, that their patients were risking not only heart disease but their livelihoods as well unless they made the necessary lifestyle changes.

"That was the beginning of a relationship with doctors in the community," she said.

By the end of the initiative's first year, the plant's monthly health care costs per employee dropped 29%, falling from \$899.37 in 2005 to \$635.88 in 2006, granting the Georgia plant a reprieve from its slated closure, Ms. Forman said.

Since then, "costs have continued to decrease, falling another 18% from 2006 to 2007," she said.

Now, instead of closing the plant, TI Automotive is expanding it.

"We're about to add another 140 jobs," Ms. Forman reported. Employees are "much more productive and we've got a community that's also supportive of the initiative. It saved not only their jobs, but a viable employer in the community."

Health conference draws 520

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.—A total of 520 employer and health benefit industry representatives from across the globe attended the Institute for Health and Productivity Management's seventh annual international conference Oct. 17-19 at the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Next year's international conference will be held Oct. 15-17,

2008, at the same location where it was held this year.

The IHPM also sponsors a health management conference each spring in Orlando, Fla., with the 2008 meeting slated for March 31-April 2.

For more information about IHPM and its conferences, visit www.ihpm.org.

—By Joanne Wojcik