

# Employee Benefit Plan Review

## Using Outpatient Rehabilitation Services to Maintain Employee Health and Productivity

With Michael Weinper, MPH, PT, national president/CEO and founder of PTPN

**O**utpatient rehabilitation therapists—primarily physical and occupational therapists—can reduce employers' medical and workers' compensation costs by helping employees recover from many types of illnesses, injuries, and surgeries, and expedite their return to work. In addition, they have much to offer employers in the way of injury prevention, health maintenance, and management of chronic conditions. Michael Weinper, MPH, PT, is national president/CEO and founder of PTPN, the nation's first and largest network of private rehabilitation practitioners. A physical therapist with over 30 years of experience in clinical practice, management consulting, administration, and program development, Mr. Weinper is a leading expert on issues surrounding the managed care and physical therapy industries today. In this interview with *EBPR*, Mr. Weinper discusses how employers can utilize rehabilitation services to keep their employees healthy and productive.

**Q** Employers are having a tough time providing their employees with quality healthcare while keeping an eye on the bottom line. Employers' health insurance premiums rose about 14 percent last year and in some states their workers' compensation insurance costs doubled over the last two years—often exceeding their costs for health and life insurance. What role do outpatient rehabilitation services play in the health and productivity of employees?

**A** One way to reduce both medical and workers' comp costs is to use outpatient rehabilitation professionals—primarily physical and occupational therapists—to help employees recover from many types of illnesses, injuries, and surgeries, and expedite their return to work. They also have much to offer employers in the way of injury prevention, health maintenance, and the management of chronic conditions. A recent study cited in

the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that workers with chronic conditions such as back pain, arthritis, and other muscle and joint pain cost American employers more than \$60 billion a year in lost productivity—and most of those costs were from sub-par job performance rather than absenteeism.

**Q** The number of older persons (55-plus) in the labor force, which was about 18.2 million in 2000, is projected to rise to 25.2 million in 2008 and to 31.9 million in 2025. As the American workforce becomes grayer, how do rehabilitation services help maintain the health of older workers?

**A** Employers will need to keep their older employees healthy and productive, and rehab therapists can help them do that. An older population means more chronic conditions, such as osteoporosis, arthritis, and diabetes, and therapists can help people manage these illnesses and stay productive on the job. For example, they help people with osteoporosis build up bone density with special weight-bearing exercises. They treat arthritic patients and those who have had joint replacements, back surgery and other orthopedic conditions with an arsenal of techniques to restore joint motion, strength, and range of movements. Therapists promote general fitness, and in the case of diabetes, those diabetics who exercise require less insulin and have better outcomes than those who are sedentary. Many of those with Type II diabetes are obese and don't exercise, so there's an example of how therapy has a positive influence.

**Q** What can therapists do for people who develop life-threatening diseases?

**A** As more people than ever survive serious illnesses, they'll need rehabilitation to return to productivity—and they'll need it quickly and appropriately—sometimes even

before surgery. We know that the more physical activity a person does, the lower the risk of stroke and heart disease, but now there's evidence that "pre-habilitation," or exercise before surgery, can aid recovery.

A professor of physical therapy at the University of Missouri found that exercising before surgery can get the body into shape and speed recovery after an operation. Rehabilitation therapy soon after surgery helps patients become ambulatory to avoid further complications, and the earlier stroke patients begin rehabilitation—sometimes even in the hospital ER—the sooner their brains "re-wire," and the better their chances of recovery.

**Q** The two most costly illnesses are heart disease (\$58 billion per year) and cancer (\$46 billion). How does rehab therapy help patients with those diseases?

**A** Heart attack survivors often go into a cardiac rehab program where they're given a modified exercise regimen supervised by physical therapists with the goal of rebuilding their cardiovascular condition. Exercise helps the body to develop new pathways of blood supply—retrains blood vessels, so, to speak—to and from the heart. And the latest research suggests that physical activity may be even more important than diet in preventing heart disease.

Cancer patients increasingly utilize physical therapy to help regain function and strength after surgery and the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation. Even with state-of-the-art treatments such as "magic bullets," gene modification, and new engineered drugs, these patients are often left debilitated. Therapists keep them feeling their best and avoiding complications later by reconditioning, re-strengthening, and returning them to normal function. Breast cancer survivors with lymphedema—a swelling of the arm or hand that occurs after removal of lymph nodes under the arm—can go to therapists with lymphedema certification who use various noninvasive techniques to reduce the swelling and improve function.

**Q** Stroke is a leading cause of serious, long-term disability in the U.S. with costs for trauma and stroke at about \$44 billion a year. What can the rehab therapist do for stroke survivors?

**A** Stroke patients show improved recovery with early intervention by physical, occupational and speech therapists as part of a critical stroke team. And there are some exciting new advances in stroke rehabilitation that actually teach the brain to reorganize itself. Physical therapists are using neural retraining techniques to help the brain re-wire around damaged areas of the brain and re-regulate the way it deals with sensory input. One technique is constraint-induced movement therapy, which temporarily restricts movement of a patient's working limbs to encourage use of the affected limbs.

**Q** Mental disorders affect a large segment of Americans, costing roughly \$30 billion a year. How can rehab therapists help in that area?

**A** People who suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress find their symptoms improve with physical activity because serotonin levels increase through exercise. In fact, a recent study from the University of Washington showed that exercise helped Alzheimer's patients combat depression. Physical therapists who specialize in fitness, and who use yoga, Pilates, and Tai Chi in their practices say that patients experience—along with increased strength and flexibility—a better overall feeling of well being.

**Q** Pulmonary conditions cost \$29 billion a year. Can those patients benefit from rehab therapy?

**A** Patients with lung conditions such as emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or who have inhaled asbestos or other pollutants that cause restricted breathing are getting stronger through the use of breathing re-training techniques.

**Q** How do rehabilitation therapists prevent work injuries?

**A** Industrial rehab therapists—physical and occupational therapists who are specialists in ergonomic interventions—help employers reduce workers' compensation costs by preventing injuries. For example, computer workstations need to be adjusted properly so employees avoid awkward postures. The keyboard should have a negative tilt to keep the wrist in a neutral position to help prevent carpal tunnel syndrome. Industrial rehab therapists also implement healthy back care classes, cumulative trauma disorder seminars, and work conditioning programs. They also offer employers jobsite analysis and functional employment testing—often referred to as "fit for duty" tests—in which job applicants undergo pre-placement screening and functional capacity evaluations. If an employee is injured, the therapist re-educates the worker to return to the job, to break bad habits, if necessary, and learn to move in new ways to avoid re-injury.

**Q** The majority of American companies offer some kind of health promotion program for employees. Can rehabilitation therapists design and implement corporate wellness programs?

**A** Physical therapists have been at the forefront of wellness activities across the nation and they can implement corporate wellness programs that may include everything from onsite exercise classes and supervised use of gym equipment, to health screenings for high blood pressure, to workshops on losing weight. They are uniquely qualified to run wellness programs because they

have the experience and knowledge about how the body moves, and they have in-depth training to assess problems. They'll ask people about their restrictions, their history, so although fitness trainers may be better educated today than in the past, they aren't therapists and they don't know how to deal with patients' limitations. Encouraging wellness is a winning situation for both employers and employees. If people are in good shape to begin with, it's less likely they'll suffer from injuries and illnesses, and if they do, they're bound to recover more rapidly.

**Q** How are Baby Boomers and seniors using rehab therapists?

**A** Baby Boomers are spending millions of dollars to defy aging and stay in shape. They use therapists who specialize in sports and fitness training, and they also use therapy to help them recover from injuries and age-related illnesses and to maintain mobility despite chronic conditions.

For seniors, fitness and exercise are keys to independent living. As we age, one of the things that deteriorates is balance. Because falls are a major cause of disability and death, a growing number of physical therapists are offering fall-prevention programs that incorporate specific balance and strengthening exercises. Seniors who feel uncomfortable in a traditional gym environment often prefer exercising in a therapist-run wellness center where they're carefully supervised by therapists who understand their conditions.

**Q** What should those responsible for choosing rehabilitation services look for in order to get maximum value?

**A** When selecting outpatient rehab services, look for private practitioners who own their own offices. Studies have indicated that private practice is the most cost-effective venue in which a patient can receive care. Therapists who own their offices are able to deliver a higher level of care and get patients better with fewer visits than do therapists who work in a physician-owned clinic or hospital. Studies cited in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that physician-owned clinics generate more visits and higher charges per patient than do independent physical therapists. Private practitioners don't have conflicts of interest, such as corporate or physician ownership, that can drive up utilization and costs.

**Q** Are there advantages to using therapists who are part of a preferred provider network?

**A** You can ensure a higher level of patient care if you choose a reputable network that requires its providers to meet strict membership criteria and stringent credentialing requirements. You should also look for a network that has broad geographic coverage for easy patient access, and make sure that its providers offer a wide range of services including physical, occupational, speech, hand and pediatric therapy as well as specialty areas such as workers' compensation injuries, ergonomic assessment and geriatrics.