

Administrator

Important news and updates from your benefits professionals

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Trends In Today's World

Patient Volume Rebounding

Even though hospitals are reporting lower activity than in 2019, patient volumes are moving closer to normal. A survey by Kaufman Hall showed that while many hospitals are concerned about the long-term impact of the pandemic, many are reporting volumes only 4% lower than 2019. As telehealth visits continue to taper off, there is no doubt that people of all ages have become more comfortable about virtual care.

Working Remote for Less

A report released by background-check company GoodHire showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents said they would take a 10% pay cut for the opportunity to work remotely. Even more people said they would forfeit benefits such as paid time off or retirement benefits if allowed to work from home.

No Deductibles or Copays

More and more examples of health plans without upfront costs are beginning to surface. One insurer has created a plan that enables members to access visits for preventive and specialty care, urgent care, labs and imaging, generic prescriptions and even ongoing therapy without

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Digging Into the Data

While fully insured plans often leave employers searching for answers, self-funded health plans open the door to data on utilization, providers and more – information that creates opportunities to lower the healthcare spend and improve population health outcomes. Generating reports is just one part of the equation. Putting claims data to effective use means knowing the right questions to ask. What conditions are driving most of your healthcare spend? What providers are members using and how do they measure up for cost and quality? Examining these and other issues can identify trends and position your health plan to better address both member needs and company objectives.

Keep an Eye on Utilization

Analyzing claims really tells you everything you need to know – not only about your plan's cost drivers but also about the demographics, well-being and needs of your covered group. Monitoring utilization identifies members with chronic conditions and monitors timely, appropriate treatment needed to keep them well. This is key not only to keeping chronic conditions in check but also to helping your plan avoid costly high dollar claims in the future.

Make Informed Decisions

Having access to data in a self-funded health plan means having not only the knowledge to make informed decisions but the freedom to be proactive in plan design. This flexibility can enable your plan to...

- Integrate an insured carve-out solution to better manage a serious illness such as cancer.



- Find cost-effective ways to control the skyrocketing cost of specialty drugs.
- Learn where members are obtaining care and create incentives that encourage the use of high-quality, lower cost providers.
- Better manage health risk with biometric screenings to assess the current health of your employee population.

Create Better Patient Outcomes

Independent TPAs not only provide employers with greater access to plan data, but they have the freedom to search outside the box for high-quality, low-cost solutions rather than settling for the status quo. Whether comparing healthcare providers based on cost and quality or exploring the potential of direct primary care with reference-based pricing, digging into the data is the best way to achieve the goal of delivering the right care in the right place at the right time.



Weed in the Workplace



When a 2021 Pew Research study conducted found that a majority of U.S. adults believe marijuana should be legalized for medicinal and recreational use, it is likely that few of the supporters were HR professionals. They knew that even though marijuana would remain illegal at the federal level, state laws would determine workplace policies. Today, a majority of states have made marijuana legal for medicinal use and more than 20 states and territories have legalized recreational marijuana. This poses many challenges for employers trying to screen and hire prospective employees, especially those with multi-state operations.

Even though laws governing the sale and use of marijuana vary, most states still support an employer's right to maintain a drug-free workplace, meaning that employees are not allowed to use or be under the influence of marijuana while at work. The difficulty stems from the fact that without administering a drug test, use is difficult if not impossible to recognize. Employers will continue to be challenged by lawmakers who continue to favor decriminalization of marijuana. While the President has opposed legalization of marijuana, he also opposes any criminal penalties for those who manufacture, distribute or possess it. While legislation to decriminalize marijuana has stalled, support remains strong among legislators and the public.

With state laws subject to change, employers are advised to review and update their policies related to medical and recreational marijuana use by current and prospective employees. It is important to not only seek legal advice but to distribute updated policies to employees and any potential job candidates.

What are Social Determinants of Health?

The World Health Organization describes social determinants of health (SDoH) as nonmedical factors that can influence health outcomes such as education, financial stability, social support and equality. While these factors have always influenced employee health and well-being, the experience gained throughout the pandemic has shown how dramatically these factors can impact not only the environment in which people live and work, but their ability to access quality healthcare.

How Plan Sponsors Can Help

When consulting with health plan sponsors, experts in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) identify a wide range of responsibilities, from promoting fair and equitable hiring practices and maintaining a diverse work culture to offering employee benefits with affordable cost sharing. Just like in any business venture, it helps to begin by assessing your current environment. Identifying the needs of your workforce and the cost of existing health benefit plans will help your organization establish meaningful social objectives. Providing financial education and counseling to employees or improving their access to preventive care are just two possibilities. One of the key advantages of self-funded health plans has always been the ability to address member needs. Keeping an eye on these factors will help employers enhance the health and well-being of their employees while achieving important business objectives.

Trends continued

having to worry about meeting a deductible or costly copay. Surgery and hospital admissions typically carry a higher price tag than normal but the hope is that removing barriers to care will help avoid expensive catastrophic claims in the future.

More Downtime

To address stress and burnout within their ranks, one employer has decided to provide employees with a 3-day weekend every month. While financial aspects of such a move would concern every employer, many believe the approach will help their bottom line by boosting not only morale but productivity. At a time when recruiting and retention are critical for so many organizations, valuing work-life balance may be something to consider.

Drug Prices Rise

Drug makers began the year with a 6.6 percent price increase on more than 800 prescription medicines, mirroring the 7 percent overall inflation rate being felt by consumers. Several of the increases were on already high-priced specialty drugs designed to treat serious conditions including cancer and diabetes.

Anticipating Normal

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, while most people believe the worst of the Covid-19 scare is behind us, views of what a return to normal life will be like and when that return should happen vary. One significant change from just six months ago is a big drop in the number of adults who support any mask requirement. In assessing their personal situations,

about half said that their daily lives are either "already largely" or "almost" back to normal. This is especially true of parents whose children have been able to return to in-person schooling.

Old Can Be New

Many talented workers who were victims of layoffs and cutbacks during Covid are returning to the workforce and many are finding better situations than they left. To get employers to focus on talent instead of age, many job seekers over the age of 55 are taking steps to appear more youthful and emphasized the value of their experience rather than the years in a resume. Some have succeeded by repositioning themselves as team players and willing mentors – qualities sought by many growing companies.

How Healthcare Spending Has Changed

A report by the Health Care Cost Institute examined data from 55 million people enrolled in employer-sponsored health plans to review changes in overall spending and out-of-pocket costs. While per-capita GDP grew nearly 15% between 2015 and 2019, per-person healthcare spending increased by nearly 22%, reaching a high of more than \$6,000 per person in 2019.

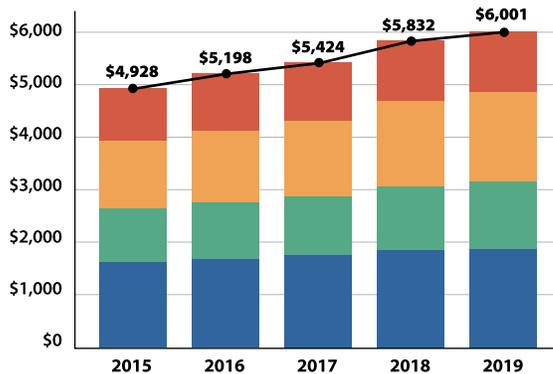
Areas included in the study were outpatient services, prescription drugs, professional services and inpatient admissions. The only area in which utilization decreased was inpatient admissions, which fell by 12.5% over the 5-year period.

Higher Out-of-Pocket Spending

According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) forecasts, direct out-of-pocket spending by consumers, including insurance premiums, was 9% of total spending in 2020 – down nearly 4% from 2019 due to the pandemic. Including Medicare payroll taxes, CMS forecasts show health spending increasing by 5.4% annually through 2028. Their projections are based on an anticipated Medicare funding shortfall beginning in 2026 and growing demand for cost-effective chronic care management programs.

Annual Spending per Person, 2015-2019

from <https://healthcostinstitute.org/>



DEI Benefits Becoming Essential

The meaning of diversity, equity and inclusion has changed dramatically since Xerox Corporation adopted an employee resource group to support black employees in the 1970s. Today, research by the multinational law firm Baker McKenzie shows that the number of U.S. companies that have expanded their definitions of diversity and inclusion had increased by more than 60% at the end of 2021.

Companies are establishing benefits and policies that support all workers, regardless of identity or circumstances. Responses from more than 900 corporate DEI leaders revealed many new DEI policies taking hold at U.S. companies. Here are just a few...

Neurodiversity policies: 63% of surveyed companies reported policies describing how to better engage with employees with autism, compared to only 14% three years ago.

Adoption policies: While less than 3 in 10 companies had policies allowing parental leave for adoption three years ago, 86% of surveyed companies offer PTO for parents who adopt today.

Domestic abuse policies: The percentage of U.S. companies with policies addressing domestic violence has increased from 21% to 82% over the past three years. These policies support employees when seeking restraining orders and cultures that encourage employees to disclose personal information about sensitive topics such as this.

There is no doubt that the umbrella of diversity and inclusion is expanding. As more and more employers realize the value of a company culture that is supportive of employees and their families, it is important to assess employee concerns and goals at your organization.

Self-Care: More Than a Test Kit

While the pandemic may have taught millions of Americans to do at-home Covid-19 testing, there's much more to the concept of self-care. While some define it as involving only actions individuals take to maintain their own health and well-being, others say it includes lifestyle choices, habits and expenditures that impact our quality of life – including the selection of hospitals, physicians and courses of medical treatment.

As chronic disease and lifestyle choices continue to drive healthcare cost increases, self-care may be more than a new name for the goal of every high-quality health plan – creating engaged healthcare consumers. Since Covid-19 has sparked greater interest in healthcare and healthcare information, let's hope more members use the myriad of products, services and technologies at their disposal to take greater control of their own health and well-being.

Did You Know? New Ideas for Healthy Consumers

Supporting Working Parents

Benefits like paid family leave, whether to address Covid-19 or otherwise, come with a price tag. But support for working parents can often require nothing more than a kind gesture. Such was the case for a father employed by HR technology company UKG who, after exhausting all other options, had to drive 24 hours to his daughter's college on the day of an important executive committee meeting. He was able to call into the meeting from the front seat of a rented U-Haul truck without having to gain permission or explain his circumstances. The level of trust made an already challenging task much less stressful than it could have been.

Other examples include senior executives taking a few minutes to call an employee tending to a spouse with a serious illness. Rather than calling to check on the status of a project, he just called to ask how things were going and if he could help in any way. While there is likely a dollar value associated with every form of support for working parents, the returns will almost always exceed the investment.



Fighting Pandemic Fatigue



As many Americans learn to cope with Covid-19 for a third year, clinical psychologists say many folks are dealing with a sort of whiplash, a feeling that even though we are doing the best we can, life is just not getting better. Mental health professionals recommend the following:

Learn to live with the virus - We've

lived through two variants and another just may come our way. Rather than hoping to eradicate the virus, deal with it and start living your life again. Focus on what you can do instead of worrying about what the virus might do.

Get serious about caring for yourself - Spring has sprung so get outside and enjoy the fresh air. Spend more time with close friends and family and less time with tablets and television. Eat healthy, get your sleep, exercise or meditate. Do whatever you normally do to minimize stress.

Stay active and interact with others - If your work or social life has been altered, find something new to keep you active and motivated. From a new hobby to a new career path, find new ways to meet and interact with others.

Please Contact Us: This newsletter is not intended as a substitute for personal medical or employee benefits advice. Please consult your physician before making decisions that may impact your personal health. Talk to your benefits administrator before implementing strategies that may impact your organization's employee benefit objectives.



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Let's Talk