CEO Roundtable To Reward Corporate Standards for Workplace Cancer Prevention

Some testing laboratories and consumer organizations bestow seals of approval on products that meet high standards of quality. Now poised to join that select group of quality advocates is corporate America. Beginning this fall the 52-member–strong CEO Roundtable on Cancer will offer its “CEO Cancer Gold Standard” to companies and organizations within its ranks that meet a quintet of requirements intended to prevent cancer occurrence and to aggressively treat the disease.

The Roundtable is an outgrowth of efforts inaugurated by C-Change (formerly known as the National Dialogue on Cancer), a nonprofit organization made up of representatives from organizations that range from the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society to state health departments and pharmaceutical companies.

The Roundtable is establishing compliance practices for tobacco cessation, cancer screening and early detection, diet and nutrition, physical activity, and access to quality medical treatment and clinical trials. Those institutions able to adopt and meet the Roundtable’s principles will be awarded the Gold Standard. The goal, according to CEO Roundtable coordinator Martin Murphy, M.D., is straightforward: Reduce death rates from any and all forms of cancer-related illness.

“In a year or two, when these policies are implemented in these companies, the rate of decline in morbidity and mortality will increase,” Murphy predicted. “Lives will be saved. There’s no question about it.” If healthy practices can forestall or prevent cancer altogether, both society and business benefit, and not simply economically, Murphy asserted.

The software services firm SAS was one of the inaugural members of the Roundtable and is an enthusiastic participant in and early adopter of Roundtable standards. Incorporated in 1976, the Cary, N.C., company bills itself as the world’s largest privately held software-services enterprise, with nearly 10,000 employees in more than 200 offices worldwide. According to Gale Adcock, R.N., M.S.N., SAS manager of corporate health services, the self-insured company has been offering free on-site health care for 20 years, with health assessments, risk identification, and screenings for breast, cervical, prostate, and colon cancers.

SAS is among those corporations and organizations attempting to preemptively forestall illness by encouraging better nutritional practices by underwriting healthy menus in workplace cafeterias, making state-of-the-art workout facilities available in or nearby places of employment, and emphasizing a balanced approach to work and leisure. Murphy describes these measures as commonsense approaches that bring together executives and the employees they lead. “You can create a virtual amphitheater of interest—and of partnership,” he said.

“This disease takes an enormous toll in terms of lost work and lost opportunity. It’s staggering. All CEOs are only too aware of that.”

For its part, the CEO Roundtable plans to roll out its Gold Standard pilot program in four anonymous Roundtable companies as early as September. The anonymity is intended; outside of the spotlight, publicity managers will be able to more effectively implement the overall program and refine assessment procedures before the standards are introduced to other participating Roundtable partners. In November, benefits managers and medical directors will convene Roundtable-wide to discuss and apply lessons learned as they prep their own enterprises for standards adoption.

As many as 10 Roundtable members could inaugurate the Gold Standard program on their premises by January 2005. Further down the road, the Roundtable plans to tackle the issue of employee participation in clinical trials, which will present its own set of unique challenges.

“Sixty to 65 percent of the death toll from cancer can be avoided today, not tomorrow,” Murphy said. “I think the floodgates could open. If corporate America creates a workplace that is conducive to healthy lifestyles, that is aware and knowledgeable, that will have a very positive effect.”

—James Schultz