



EHFG 2011: STAYING AT WORK WITH A CHRONIC DISABILITY

The Swiss Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society described at the European Health Forum Gastein pioneering methods for employers to retain workers with MS, an illness that affects 500,000 people across Europe and costs €15bn annually in direct and indirect costs. Tailor-made case management had been a signal success in a pilot project at Ford-Werke Deutschland, where 500 workers with chronic disability have been reintegrated in the workforce. A pilot project for associates with MS at Novartis AG, Switzerland, is ongoing. These case management approaches can enhance staff morale, stop valuable experience going to waste, and cut the burden on health and social services.

Bad Hofgastein, October 7, 2011 – Presenting a new paper “From disability to ability at work”, Dr Christoph Lotter, Vice-Director of the long-established, 15,000-member Swiss MS Society, explained that as 70% of multiple sclerosis (MS) cases occur between the ages of 20 and 40 years, most people with MS are in employment at the time of diagnosis. “This is necessarily impacting workforces. The economic cost of MS in Europe is €15bn annually, of which €5bn is lost productivity, working out at some €36,000 per patient,” said Dr Lotter, speaking at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). Case management programmes are being pioneered by the Swiss MS Society, which is in active partnerships with Novartis AG, Switzerland, and many other organisations and health insurers to maintain productive employment for people with MS, with benefits for employers and society at large.

Dr Lotter explained the essence of the approach was “systematic and cooperative”, tailored to individual needs and abilities: “The progressive nature of the disease means that planning for job adaptation or career change should be implemented as early as possible. This requires a climate of trust and a willingness from employer and employee to maintain long-term employment in a manner adjusted to the abilities of the employee.”

Focussing on abilities not disabilities

Society at large profited as well, said Dr Lotter, who presented figures suggesting the gains, to society as well as to the employers, of keeping an employee in service for 10 years working half-time amounted to well over €500,000. The theme was echoed by Ford-Werke Deutschland, where a project to reintegrate 500 workers into productive employment resulted in 300 successfully reintegrated employees and a reduction in sick leave. There are now 19 cross-functional case management teams providing return-to-work management for around 1500 cases a year. Experiences at Ford showed that it was a win-win-win situation for the employee, the company and the government social system. After a decade of successful efforts to maintain people in employment despite economic pressure and global challenges, the principles of ability-driven job placement have been proven to be effective for all diseases including for those employees with MS.

“An appreciative and respectful corporate culture”

It has been highlighted that the key to effective case management was to focus on the abilities of patients instead of disabilities. Most people with MS want to stay in work – about 70% of newly-diagnosed patients are between 20 and 40 years old. The progressive, degenerative, or fluctuating nature of their disease makes it necessary to adapt working environments and hours. The pilot scheme at Novartis AG aims to benefit employees with MS by offering personalised plans and assistance programmes to match their job requirements to their abilities. Creative solutions in adapting jobs include opportunities to work remotely, part time, or on a job sharing basis. The scheme provides employees with MS a structured and tailored career path while retaining and further developing their expertise, reduces absence rates and increases productivity, and ensures economic benefits for the company, including a reduction of pension and insurance commitments. The set up of such a program had engendered a commitment for change and a consensus between employees, management, and social partners. The overall strategy reinforces an appreciative and respectful corporate culture.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it attracted more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries for discussions on the latest developments in health care policy.

EHFG BWS 2: Maintaining productivity at work with a chronic disease: Successful case management approaches in multiple sclerosis (MS), 7 October 2011

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