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“Consumer Engagement”: Great Expectations for Employees -- and Their Employers

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From the Editor

**“Consumer Engagement”:
Great Expectations for Employees --
and Their Employers**

Health care consumers of all stripes – young and old, healthy and sick, employed and retired – are increasingly being asked to take on more responsibility for their health and health care. Most current strategies for health care reform, including consumer-directed health plans and medical savings accounts, set high expectations for individual behavior. In this emerging era of “consumer engagement,” individuals are being asked to take on a long and daunting set of “responsible behaviors.” Just a partial list of these behaviors includes:

- Following recommendations for promoting personal health (such as diet, exercise, quitting smoking, limiting alcohol use, wearing seat belts, etc.)
- Getting screened at appropriate intervals (for cancer and other conditions)
- Establishing a relationship with a primary care provider
- Managing chronic conditions to prevent decline in health status
- Comparing coverage options when selecting health plans
- Selecting competent doctors and safe hospitals
- Choosing effective treatments
- Taking drugs as directed
- Interacting successfully with health professionals and institutions
- Maintaining accurate records of personal medical history

Clearly, the vast majority of people do not engage in these behaviors. Many do not even realize that they are expected to act in these ways. Others are unable to take on these expected behaviors because they lack the information, skills, cognitive or physical abilities, or material resources to do so.

If “consumer engagement” is to become more than just the latest catch phrase (or worse, an excuse for employers to shift the growing financial burden of health care to their workers), purchasers will need to take a much more aggressive role in equipping their employees and their dependents to assume the wide range of personal responsibilities increasingly expected of them. Specifically, employers and union leaders must work together to develop and implement an infrastructure of communication, information, incentives, and interventions that will inform, motivate, and support people in adopting these behaviors.

Growing expectations for consumer behavior mean even greater expectations – not less – for employers to provide needed information and support. The challenges and barriers are enormous, but there are promising models of

successful initiatives to change consumer behavior in even the most difficult circumstances. For example, as reported in a previous issue of Value-Based Purchasing (Volume 1, Issue 1), the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union has found success in multiple interventions aimed at increasing consumer use of preventive services, managing chronic disease, adhering to prescribed medications, and selecting higher performing family doctors. Other successful examples, such as Pitney Bowes and the City of Knoxville, also have been profiled in VBP and in our regular course offerings.

In this issue of VBP, we are pleased to include an interview with Debra Ness, President of the National Partnership for Women and Families. Debra offers the perspective of one of the nation's most influential consumer groups on the increasing role of consumers in making decisions about their health and health care. This interview highlights the importance of employers working with consumer groups to develop a united approach to engaging consumers in their health and health care. The benefits of doing so will accrue not only to individuals through better health and wellbeing, but to employers through increased control over costs and productivity, and to the nation as a whole through a safer, more efficient, and effective health care system.

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