

The Standard

Employees deserve help to deal with mental illness: Statistics show early treatment can save employers thousands in lost employees' wages

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Standard readers may have been startled to see in a front-page story Wednesday that mental health problems now account for 30 to 40 per cent of disability claims reported by Canada's major insurers and employers.

While employers have made great strides in reducing physical impediments to health and safety in the workplace, mental health issues are becoming the major challenges that need to be addressed by companies and businesses.

On Wednesday, the Global Business and Economic **Roundtable on Addiction** and Mental Health announced two research projects that seek to identify management practices that could trigger or worsen depression or mental illness in employees.

One is a survey by the Harvard Medical School that will follow 100,000 Canadian employees in their prime working years to tally the cost benefits of early and effective treatment of depression.

The second initiative, run by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, will conduct applied research on **mental health** in the workplace over the next 10 years.

Roundtable CEO Bill Wilkerson said his organization will help to fund the research projects and will line up businesses to volunteer their worksites as laboratories for the research. The goal is to eliminate such forms of job stress as uncertainty over employment security, "management practices which isolate people from information" and "the relentless treadmill effect at work."

We applaud the effort of businesses and researchers to alleviate mental illnesses and to remove the stigma felt by those affected by it.

It is not only a benefit in human terms, it can also save companies a great deal of money to treat the illness early.

According to Mental Health Works, a project of the Canadian Mental Health Association, depression and mental health issues have surpassed heart disease and are now the fastest-growing category of disability costs in the country. Health Canada estimates the economic burden on employers is now close to \$30 billion a year for mental health and addiction problems.

As with physical illness, early treatment is key to reducing or eliminating the problem. According to Mental Health Works, when employees get early access to treatment, employers save \$5,000 to \$10,000 per worker per year in the costs of prescription drugs, sick leave and wage replacement. Workers who are diagnosed with depression and who take the prescribed medication save employers an average of 11 absentee days per year.

As an example of such programs in the workplace, Husky Injection Molding Systems in Bolton, Ont., calculates it saved \$8 million in less absenteeism and increased productivity after investing \$4 million in its employees' wellbeing and a healthy workplace environment. In addition, annual drug costs for workers were \$157 in 1997. The average for similar businesses for the year was \$495.

We are encouraged when we see examples like this. We believe businesses should foster healthy work environments. It is good for employers to see such help does not run up big costs, rather it saves companies money.

All of us must do more to eliminate the stigma that has surrounded mental illness for centuries. We have the tools to do so now, and we're seeing more signs that early treatment makes good business sense.

For those reasons, we urge more businesses to join those companies that are helping their employees to cope with their ailments. Workers who are struggling with mental illness should not have to fight those battles alone.

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