Workers' Comp

Examining Social Determinants of Health: The Whole Person Approach

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3 MIN READ

In the past five years, terms such as advocacy, engagement, coaching, and even "whole-person approach" have been widely discussed within workers' compensation — for good reason.

The conversation around whole-person approach generates many important questions. For one, how do we support the whole person by offering one comprehensive solution? And, what part do digital health programs play in meeting the needs of injured employees? Further, how do we deliver a personalized experience and meet injured employees where they are in their journey to recovery?

Social determinants of health, or the conditions in which an individual lives, works, learns, and plays, are a big part of the answer to any of these questions. According to the nonprofit Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 80 percent of health outcomes are influenced by non-clinical factors. Given that, it only makes sense to examine the social determinants of health and their impact on recovery and return to work. As we do this, we should look for ways to align our care management approach to identify and address non-medical barriers.

We've always known social determinants are important

For case managers, it is hard to ignore social determinants of health even if they haven't always applied that term to what they're observing. Case managers get to know the injured employee and their families on a more intimate level. They can help ensure clinical programs avoid the pitfalls of treating the primary diagnosis only. They can act as an advocate, looking at the whole person to identify those social determinants of health that might be impeding recovery.

Social determinants of health can have a tremendous effect on outcomes. We are seeing evidence today with disparities in how different groups respond to COVID-19 and with COVID-19 vaccination rates. Social determinants play an outsized role because, in many ways, they represent the rest of our story — the part that is not always found in a medical record. It involves factors such as employment status, home life and ability to adhere to healthy dietary guidelines.

Here are some of the major factors:

- Economic stability
- Physical environment

- Education
- Access to healthy food
- Community and social contents
- Health care system

Get to know employees by knowing what's affecting them

Meeting employees where they are and understanding the challenges they face gives us the greatest chance at helping them achieve best-possible outcomes. If we have deeper knowledge of the circumstances that surround injured employees, we can intervene in ways that are more impactful. Most injured employees will appreciate that we're showing interest in their circumstances. Beyond being aware of hurdles that might be present, it's important for employees to simply know that we care. Being aware of social determinants is crucial to understanding employees and setting them on the right path to recovery.

To learn more about social determinants of health and other trends impacting workers' compensation in 2021, download our latest white paper *Harness the Power of Case Management to Succeed in the Year Ahead***.**



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