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StayHealthy Finds Ally in PPACA

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Benefits Pro

Americans are an independent bunch. We scan and bag our own groceries, pump our own gas, handle our own home repairs, and scour YouTube for how-to instructions so we can do even more on our own. What horizons, then, of self-sufficiency could possibly be left to conquer?

Basic healthcare monitoring, if StayHealthy Inc. has anything to say about it.

For nearly 20 years the privately held, Monrovia, Calif., company has been developing both hardware and software applications to help individuals and organizations measure and track some of the early predictors of potentially serious medical problems, of which there seem to be no shortage.

Its kiosks are a common sight at supermarkets and pharmacies. The company also makes monitors and other tools. And now, the [Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act](#) is helping it expand into new markets, namely America's workplace.

Obesity and its complications account for much of the medical costs that employers face, according to statistics from the American Heart Association. And trouble can start long before a worker ever hears those two little words, "You're hired." Nearly 24 million children between the ages of 2 and 19 are overweight or obese, notes the Heart Association, putting them at risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, bone and joint problems, even psychological problems. Obese children, warns the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are likely to become obese adults, vulnerable to strokes, cancers and osteoarthritis.

Treating chronic diseases like these accounts for some 75 percent of the national health care bill, according to the Workplace Wellness and Program Study, a Rand Corp. report published last year and funded by the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services. Particularly worrisome for employers: "The incidence of chronic disease, once thought to be the province of the elderly, has in the last 10 years increased by 25 percent among working-age adults."

The bill for all this? In 2010 the country wrote a \$2.6 trillion check to cover health care costs: 17.9 percent of GDP, or \$8,402 per capita, according to the CDC statistics.

To meet the national challenge of improving health and reducing costs, Stayhealthy makes a number of high-tech, FDA-approved devices that test for calorie expenditure, blood pressure, heart rate, total body weight, total body composition (lean mass, body fat, and hydration level), color blindness, and Body Mass Index (BMI), a measure of body fat calculated from a person's height and weight.

"Our approach," said John Collins, president of the 52-employee company, "is to provide consumer-connected solutions."

In other words, the technology measures and alerts users to their health status, which can then be regularly checked, monitored, and stored on Stayhealthy's secure, HIPPA-compliant, cloud-based servers.

A user can access his or her personal Stayhealthy Dashboard from a computer, smartphone or tablet anywhere there's an internet connection. The Dashboard also offers various solutions, tips and practices to help users improve their health. "Say you want to lose 10 pounds over a particular period of time," explained Collins, "the Dashboard will provide various options on how you can achieve that goal."

with the Affordable Health Care Act's aim of reducing runaway medical costs, Stayhealthy is not only pursuing business with private-sector employers such as retailers, hotels and health clubs; it's also chasing contracts with government, hospitals and schools. The timing, perhaps, couldn't be better.

More than half of U.S. employers with 50 or more employees offer wellness programs that include screening to identify risk factors and interventions to promote healthy lifestyles, notes the Rand Wellness study, adding that "employers overwhelmingly expressed confidence that workplace wellness programs reduce medical cost, absenteeism and health-related productivity losses."

The giant food chain Kroger Co., for example, has embraced wellness concepts that include its customers. Nationally, the supermarket has installed Stayhealthy's standalone HealthCENTER Kiosk in about 2,000 of the company's in-store pharmacies. At no cost, customers can check blood pressure, pulse rate, body fat and more in the sit-down kiosk that generally occupies some corner of the pharmacy. "Say you go shopping once or twice a week," said Collins, "you're there, so you use the kiosk and check your numbers."

"People definitely use the machine," said a pharmacy tech at a Los Angeles Kroger. "I like to keep track of my health, so I use it myself. And it's pretty accurate."

Running the full battery of tests on the HealthCENTER Kiosk takes about five to eight minutes, but users can select one or two particular areas of concern, such as blood pressure or body fat, and be done in a couple of minutes.

While Stayhealthy's gadgetry has that Trekkie hint of galaxies far, far away, the company is well aware of the black holes right here on planet Earth.

About four years ago, StayHealthy, NCR, and PharmaTrust decided to act on some extensive research suggesting that a coordinated technology system could significantly reduce the average two-hour wait times for non-critical patients of Canadian emergency rooms.

Technology from each company would contribute to a system where low-risk patients – those coming in to get meds for a migraine, for example – could check themselves in, take basic vital readings through Stayhealthy's Kiosk, speak to a doctor via webcam and, if determined, receive a prescription through a licensed pharmacist at the PharmaTrust kiosk.

Routine situations could be dispatched quickly, and doctors would be free to handle true, life-threatening emergencies. PharmaTrust, however, folded before the system could be implemented. "We had data that showed how technology could really change things," says Alix Edmiston, a spokesperson for NCR, which has since shuttered its medical division. "It was a very cool concept, and a shame it didn't get off the ground."

While partnerships in a wired world require that all the partners stay wired, the brightest technology in the world still has to contend with the most capricious software bug of all: people.

In 2008 StayHealthy conducted a pilot program at eight fire stations of the South Kitsap Fire and Rescue Division, in Washington state. Tim Mason, a firefighter and wellness program director, recalls that the voluntary program included Stayhealthy technology that measured hydration, calories and body composition. "I pushed hard to make it mandatory," said Mason, "but ran into all sorts of rules preventing that. So the guys who were in good health really didn't need it, and the guys who were out of shape, the ones who really needed the information, were the most resistant. They just didn't want to know."

That sort of initial resistance is not uncommon, said Collins, noting that it takes about a year of starting and stopping for individuals to eventually reach a point where awareness of one's health and the willingness to do something about it on a consistent basis becomes important – and routine.

Most companies that offer wellness programs try to speed up and maintain that process by offering incentives to employees. While some programs impose penalties for non-compliance or not reaching personal goals, most wellness programs reward employees with cash, prizes, and even reductions on medical insurance premiums for engaging in all sorts of "healthy" activities: completing a health-risk assessment, joining Weight Watchers or a gym, losing weight, lowering cholesterol and blood pressure, quitting smoking, eating more fruits and vegetables, even visiting a dentist to have one's teeth cleaned.

A survey conducted by Fidelity Investments and the National Business Group on Health found that incentives for wellness programs reached about \$521 per employee in 2013, up from \$260 in 2009.

Collins is confident that his company will play a key role in bettering the nation's health, for one simple reason: "You can't change what you can't see." StayHealthy, of course, lets people see what needs changing.

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