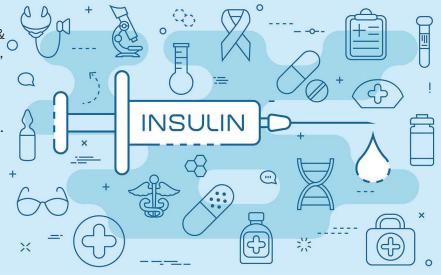
### NSURANCE – Life & Health

# Mitigating the 'tsunami of chronic disease'

At the 1st Asia Employee Benefits & Insurance Conference in Singapore, a clarion call was made to the industry to empower employers in helping their staff manage their health better for everyone's benefit.







The issue of health management is fast becoming a recurrent theme in the insurance industry as society grapples with an increasingly ageing population and workforce. Thus, it was no surprise that the central theme at the inaugural Asia Employee Benefits & Insurance Conference revolved around the topic of health management, where speakers shared in more depth the various factors involved, including brain and eye health.

The end message however was clear – that a healthy workforce makes for higher productivity and better financial performance for companies. Hence, it is in employers' best interests not to neglect employee health and welfare but rather invest in it.

## Push for proactive health management

Non-communicable diseases (NCD) account for 80% of the health burden in Singapore in 2016, but a third of it could be prevented, said Health Promotion Board's director of workplace health



and outreach Sim Beng Khoon. The mantra for Singapore's health ministry, he said, was to "move from healthcare to health". "Your employees are an important asset and you must invest in their health," he said. According to a World Health Organization report, every \$1 spent in prevention and education of NCDs would yield a \$7 return in lower- and lower-middle income countries.

CXA Group founder and CEO Rosaline Koo spoke of the need for a paradigm change, "We can no longer wait for employees to get sick." Instead, employers need to



push the responsibility for employee health to the employees themselves. Utilising a wallet, such as the one CXA provides, would allow employees to live within the means of their 'health budget', the same way they live within the means of their typical budget. For employers, this would also shift insurance spend to prevention, rather than the costlier cure.

## Employee behavioural change crucial

But aside from resources and information, experts noted that insurers and employers also need to drive behavioural change among employees. Oliver Wyman health and life

sciences consultant
Dr Manav Saxena
told delegates that a
generous employee
benefits package
is insufficient – it
is about how these
programmes help
achieve a better and
healthier outcome for
employees.



Using obesity as an example, healthcare start-up Naluri Hidup co-founder Dr Jeremy Ting made the case for a digital health coach. The

Naluri app, he said, could help people achieve their health goals by putting a health coach using data science and analytics in their pocket.

He said the challenge of healthcare today is to surround an individual with all the care needed to integrate mental and emotional health, to democratise access to care so that it is convenient and confidential – and to personalise and customise such care through big data to find a local fit. Because while professional support and structured programmes are more likely to result in people achieving their health goals, they are often out of reach of those who need them most.

And this is where Naturi can play a role. Leveraging digital technology, AI and machine learning, it enables a pool of psychologists to service multiple users simultaneously, while boosting the capabilities of each psychologist with the collective experience of everyone. Dr Ting said this benefits both user, in reducing his access cost to psychotherapy by 80%, and psychologist, whose productivity is increased by up to 10 times compared to traditional one-to-one interaction. Naluri can also influence behaviour further by providing personalised 'nudges' to individuals based on their daily activity history, recognising their personal food and nutrition needs and tailoring its chat style and cadence to engage users better.

"The conversation is not 'don't go to a market store'. The conversation is 'if you go there, rather than having roti canai, should you have dosai instead'," he said. "Little changes in your life make a difference. You don't need perfection."

#### **Cognitive health**

One interesting – and perhaps novel – topic discussed during the conference was the importance of cognitive health, which Savonix founder and CEO Dr Mylea Charvat said employ-



ers should monitor. While doctors and employers have been attempting to improve their employees' physical health, the discussion of mental health is a recent one. Debunking the frequent distinction between mental and physical health, she said, "There is just health. Your brain is a physical part of your body. Things like depression and anxiety are disorders of the brain and they have a physical effect."

The World Health Organization lists depression as the leading cause of ill-health and loss of work function in the world. "What we need to do, as employers, is to monitor and improve brain health, which in turn reduces safety risks and improves productivity," she said.

With advancements in medicine helping people live longer, the aim is to help people live healthier for longer as well. This requires helping employees achieve good health not only in the workplace, but in their home lives as well, which feeds into a positive feedback loop of health and productivity.

## HR and insurance providers should be aligned

How companies' human resource functions and insurance companies can align their interests was covered in a panel discussion led by CXA Group chief commercial officer Gary Tok, and comprising Great Eastern Life Assurance medical director and head of group insurance Dr Leow Yung Khee, Aviva head of group employee benefits (life and health) Manu Tandon, AIA Singapore chief corporate solutions officer Alvin Fu, Seagate International executive director Molly Ang, DBS Bank group head of benefits Eudora Choo, and Manulife total rewards director Jessie Cheing.

## No change in fundamental employee benefit needs

Although demographics and expectations have shifted in the last few decades, speakers noted that employees' needs – healthcare, retirement and leave – across geographies and generations remain 'quite the same'. In the past, employee benefits were considered 'bread and butter' to a job. This notion has since evolved to more of an incentive to 'create employee stickiness' as a means of talent

retention.

One issue that the HR practitioners noted is the lack of variety in insurance products being offered, although the question also arose as to whether employees were informed enough to make the appropriate choice amid an expanded offering of products. While the insurers agreed with them to an extent, they said 'products have not really changed because the fundamental need [for risk protection] hasn't changed.' This being said, insurance companies recognise the evolution is in 'helping employees to live healthier longer'.

With millennials in the workforce, panellists also noted that insurance companies have invested substantially over the last few years – not only to engage with digitally-savvy employees, but on the health side to help employers and employees in health and disease management and potentially helping to lower costs.

## Rethink benefit programmes to reshape staff mentality

On cost management, speakers noted that the concept of 'shared responsibility' in employee benefits is relatively 'weak in Asia' and that HR tends to end up taking the 'entitlement option'. "Why must the company always be the party who pays, as opposed to a co-payment scheme?" the panel asked.

To achieve effective change in cost management, speakers noted that HR managers need to think differently in developing employee benefit programmes so as to drive a shift in employee mentality, where staff are more discerning in utilising their benefits.

The 1st Asia Employee Benefits & Insurance Conference was organised by *Asia Insurance Review* with CXA Group and Singapore Human Resources Institute as co-organisers. It drew some 160 participants.

