

## Taking control OL

As health-care costs spin into the stratosphere, employers offer incentives for workers to live healthier lives

By **HEATHER REESE**  
STAFF WRITER

How would you react if your employer encouraged you to quit smoking, get on a diet and start working out? What kind of incentive would you need to participate?

What if your employer offered to save you money in return for your cooperation? How far would you go to lower the cost of your health care — or more importantly, how far would your employer go?

By the year 2012, King County government's annual health-care costs for its 13,000 workers are projected to increase from \$133 million to \$300 million. That's why health leaders in the Puget Sound region are exploring ways to take health care in a whole new direction.

"Personal responsibility" was the hot topic among leaders in the Puget Sound region during the second part of Seattle CityClub's 2005 health club series, "Eat Your Carrots or Else!"

"I don't think that number (\$300 million) is really meaningful to us until we think — that's us they're talking about," said newscaster Jean Enersen of KING TV, who moderated the discussion. "That's people we know that are working in the King County government."

During the forum, a group of four panelists conducted a discussion about lowering the cost of health care through more personal responsibility by offering confidential health assessments and incentives for employees, greater accountability from providers and more coordination among consumers, employers and health plans. The panel included King County Executive and chair of the Puget Sound Health Alliance Ron Sims, Executive Director of the University of Washington Medical Center Kathleen Sellick, First Vice President of Health and Wellness for Washington Mutual Mike Cochran and Rebecca Williams, a partner of the Davis Wright Tremaine law firm and a registered nurse.

According to panel members, the missing piece of the health-care puzzle is substantial incentives, both for providing high-quality health care and for employees to become better health-care consumers.

"What if your benefits would go down, what if your premiums would go up — or what if there was a third way that eliminated the first two possibilities?" Enersen suggested. "What if you could lower your own health-care costs by taking better care of yourself or of your family? What if you could better educate yourself about health and its costs? Well, nowadays we really are talking (about) meaningfully attaching a dollar amount to lifestyle, that's taking personal responsibility."

King County is planning to hold employees personally responsible for their health through "Healthy Incentives," a progressive insurance plan spearheaded by Sims. Created by the county and unions together, this new 2007-2009 health insurance plan for employees and their families features a "get healthy and stay healthy" motto.

While the covered services provided by the "Healthy Incentives" program will remain the same, out-of-pocket expenses such as deductibles and co-payments will vary from person to person based on program participation and personal health. Those who choose not to participate will receive the same coverage, but will pay higher out-of-pocket medical expenses than those who participate.

"Consumers need to grasp control of their health care," Sims said, adding that health improvement and lifestyle changes are more important than the initial personal health status of a person. "We're not asking for perfection, we're asking for effort."

Under the plan, employees and their spouses or domestic partners choose to take annual confidential wellness assessments beginning in January 2006. After the



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**At a discussion of "personal responsibility" health care called "Eat Your Carrots or Else" held July 21, panelist Mike Cochran answers a question from the audience at the Woman's University Club as other panelists, from left, Rebecca Williams, Ron Sims and Kathleen Sellick, look on.**

assessment, participation is required in confidential follow-up programs offered by third-party vendors that set the goal of improving individual health and containing health-care costs. King County determines eligibility for out-of-pocket expenses based upon the assessments and follow-up actions.

Washington Mutual Inc. has been using a less aggressive rewards health-care program for about six months. According to Cochran, Washington Mutual employees can earn points toward gift cards for a variety of health related activities as a part of the company's

"Healthy Rewards" program.

Healthy lifestyle changes are the key to incentive-based programs, Sellick said. "(We ask the question), what can they do as an alternative to what they're doing now?"

Overall, health professionals argue that incentive-based health-care programs would provide benefits for consumers and providers alike in the long run.

"Employers have a responsibility to make a change in the system," said Cochran.

Contact: hreese@bizjournals.com • 206-447-8505x108