

Comprehensive in-house HIV/Aids programmes offer real benefits for employees

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Many South African companies provide corporate HIV/Aids management strategies to employees. However the impact of HIV/ AIDS related deaths indicate that more needs to be done in the workplace to stabilise the situation and to maximise productivity.

Traditionally, major companies tackle the pandemic by introducing programmes that do not take a holistic approach to the problem and, as a result, employees have not benefitted from the full spectrum of interventions including diagnosis, counselling and then appropriate antiretroviral treatment as part of a comprehensive, sustainable medical scheme package

Rodney Cowlin, Director at Aid for AIDS (AfA) says, "The failure to provide an end-to-end approach as part of a corporate strategy to deal with HIV/Aids can have major consequences for employers. Many employees are afraid of the implications and potential costs of being diagnosed as HIV positive and tend to ignore the problem. They report to work as normal, but because of their illness, are not able to do much work. Productivity suffers and, when the worker is finally forced to confront his illness, it is often too late to do something constructive."

"However, if employees have a clear understanding of the disease, the programmes provided by the employer and are confident that they will receive support and a subsidised medical package, they are more likely to participate in an HIV/Aids programme and be productive for many years while undergoing treatment," Cowlin said.

Aid for AIDS, believes that the process should begin with an employee survey where the findings are used to gauge the perceptions and understanding of employee groups towards the pandemic. Drawing up a "balance sheet" of practices and employee knowledge would then provide a firm basis for further action.

"Far too often, this step is overlooked by well-meaning companies who implement programmes that employees neither understand nor identify with. In the worst case scenario, procedures are put in place that employees fear are discriminatory and lack confidentiality.

"If this step is correctly undertaken, the employer is then able to proceed with the structured introduction of a tailor-made plan - one that takes into account local issues and concerns", Cowlin said.

In this way, the employer can ensure that any HIV/Aids awareness and education processes undertaken are at the desired level.

Cowlin stresses that the key to an effective HIV/Aids intervention is to make it easy and acceptable for affected employees to come forward and confront their illness as soon as possible. The earlier they do this, the more cost effective retroviral treatments are and cost escalations in providing treatment at a later stage are avoided and hospitalisation costs are avoided.

“Many employers believe that the costs of providing support and access to retroviral treatments of this nature are prohibitive, but that is definitely not the case. These interventions should be considered as an investment that provides a real return. Productive employees are more likely to stay with an employer that has demonstrated commitment to the workforce.”

Other benefits lie in the fact that companies adopting this approach are not caught by surprise by HR issues precipitated by HIV/Aids.

“Once a company has collected reliable data on the incidence of HIV/Aids in its ranks, it is able to plan ahead, account for the costs of providing assistance and then formulate recruitment policies correctly,” he added.

“Aid for AIDS has had success with convincing some companies of the need to adopt this comprehensive approach. In every case this has been done, we’re seeing incredible results in terms of numbers of people attending education sessions, coming forward for testing and enrolling onto the disease management programme. This has enormous repercussions for individuals and companies alike. For the individual, it means they’re finding out their status, getting appropriate counselling and advice and ultimately getting the care and treatment that will keep them alive, enjoying a quality of life. For the company, they can take comfort in the fact they’re providing a truly useful benefit to their staff and of course, will be rewarded with a good return on their investment”, he concluded.

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