

what's working

making wellness
a family affair

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**



Dr. James Meschino

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Patricia Irvine has belonged to a gym for years, but until recently her longtime boyfriend, John Lester, showed little interest in joining with her.

In addition to her regular workouts, Irvine recently began tracking her nutrition and other health habits through an online wellness program offered by Lester's health and welfare fund. Lester is a retired member of United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbers and Pipefitting Industry Local 496 and its affiliated benefit plans—the Calgary District Pipe Trades (CDPT) Health and Welfare and Pension Plans.

The wellness program is available to plan members and their families, and Irvine, 64, credits her participation as part of the reason Lester is changing his tune on a workout regimen. “I feel amazing,” she said. Convincing her significant other to take a greater interest in his health has been a slow process, but “my participation in the wellness program has encouraged him.”

And Irvine noted that Lester's former co-workers and their wives are talking more about wellness since the program began. “At least it's becoming a conversation between the both of us, and that's very cool.”

Reaching spouses and partners like Irvine is one part of the strategy to get plan members engaged in the wellness program, say the fund's trustees. Spouses can have a significant influence on members' health habits.

Many of the plan's members, who are mostly men, have been apathetic about wellness in the past, said Arnie de Roode, a trustee. “You know how people are when they have to deal with change or they see something new. They're a little reluctant. Participation is getting better and

better, but it also seems that when the wives or spouses go to the meetings, that's when things start clicking.”

A review of the plan's disability and drug plan costs revealed that members are dealing with the same problems that affect the general population—chronic health conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity, said Terry Crawley, the fund's senior administrator. Crawley is a senior account manager and director of marketing at The PBAS Group. Trustees “very quickly concluded that we need to educate. We need to raise awareness,” he said. They started attending health and wellness conferences to investigate how to start a wellness program.

“We wanted to see if there was something that we could offer the members and their families that was reasonably priced while encouraging them to start thinking more about their health and their wellness,” said David Maisey, board chairman. The board's goal was to get members to develop better health regimens and capture the attention of spouses.

One of the challenges of creating a wellness program for a construction industry trust fund, particularly in a large province like Alberta, is that members are dispersed throughout the province, Crawley said.

Employees are not in a single location, so opening a gym or an on-site health clinic wasn't an option. Instead trustees “had to think more broadly,” he said. “The idea of offering an Internet-based platform that could also be interactive was attractive for that reason.”

The trustees contracted with Meschino Health and Wellness of Mississauga, Ontario to provide an Internet-based program. The program was launched in July 2015 and, so far, about 30% of its 2,200 members are enrolled.

After participating members and their families enroll, they complete an online nutrition, lifestyle and health risk assessment. The assessment generates a report that shows them areas where they're doing well and opportunities for improvement. For example, someone who needs to build lean muscle mass receives guidance on how much to exercise, how much protein to eat and which foods have the most protein.

Members who are overweight gain access to a weight-management program with tracking tools. The site also tells them what health tests they should be getting, whether it's a colonoscopy or a mammogram.

Members can then set their own health goals, and the site provides them with tools they can use on a daily, weekly or monthly basis to track their weight, sleep and other health factors.

If they have a significant health condition like high blood pressure or high cholesterol, they receive a series of weekly newsletters on those subjects describing small steps they can take to improve their health. Members also receive a weekly update on lifestyle medicine and a short motivational video from Meschino.

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After CDPT selected the program, the next challenge was getting members to enroll.

The trustees made an initial announcement through e-mail and conducted a telephone blitz that successfully reached about 40% of members. Notably, through the telephone campaign, the CDPT administrator discovered that its e-mail database wasn't current, so e-mails weren't reaching as many members as the board anticipated. Initial meetings and print mailings had limited success, but another telephone blitz and continuing efforts to update e-mail addresses has improved communication outreach.

"We concluded that we had to try to somehow personalize the message," Crawley said.

The trustees already were organizing an education semi-



From left: Terry Crawley, Calgary District Pipe Trades (CDPT) health and welfare fund senior administrator, talks with fund trustees David Maisey and Arnie de Roode.

nar for pension plan information and decided to incorporate a presentation by Dr. James Meschino, director of wellness and health promotion at Meschino Health and Wellness, into the event. “The first one we did was a smashing hit,” Crawley said. Close to 20 couples attended.

“The members and their spouses loved it, based on all reports and feedback. They could see how retirement and wellness are married,” Crawley said. Many of the members’ wives showed a high level of interest, so the trustees scheduled another session with Meschino focusing specifically on women’s health issues. About 20 women attended that session.

When members have an opportunity to personally interact with spouses and fellow members through the wellness program, their interest increases and they get co-workers excited, Crawley said. That excitement spurs them to use the online platform and attend future workshops. Future

workshops combining pension and wellness information are planned.

The workshops create a sense of community, which is an important part of the success of employee wellness programs, Meschino said.

“The evidence shows that where you actually have the best results for sustainable change to help people have healthier lives and improve their healthy life expectancy is with employee-based programs, if they’re done well,” he said. “They work because there’s a group dynamic that happens. With an employer- or plan member-based program, people are supporting each other and sharing information that they find useful.”

A dialogue about wellness has begun among plan members, Crawley said. “That tells me that there’s something of value here. I’m not hearing that this is a waste. What I’m hearing is, ‘How can we take advantage of this more thoroughly?’”