Surviving Workplace Wellness

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Surviving Workplace Wellness

with Your Dignity, Finances and major ^ *Organs Intact*

By Al Lewis and Vik Khanna

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Seven

So Many Lies, So Few Trees: Nebraska's State Employee Wellness Program

Until now, we've tried to pack each lie into a page or less, because leading environmentalists are now urging authors to shorten their books in order to conserve valuable resources, such as paper, ink, and semicolons. Hence, we owe a debt of gratitude to the vendors whose lies are concise enough to allow us to pack them all into Chapter 6, giving us plenty of room to describe Nebraska's lies in Chapter 7 while still keeping this book to a brief, environmentally sound, 186 pages. That brevity means the more copies you buy, the more trees you save. Have a wellness vendor do the math if you don't believe me.

Likewise, if you are reading *Surviving Workplace Wellness* electronically, its brevity means that you are preventing the needless destruction of millions of defenseless electrons.[33]

Before we get started, note that you don't have to take my word for any of this because, like most of the other supporting materials in this book, as of this writing the Nebraska report is downloadable. Be forewarned that to say this report shows a lack of understanding of any aspect of population health or outcomes measurement would be an

33 Just for the record, I do actually know that reading an e-book does not kill electrons. Nor does it disable them, injure them, or even stress them out much. Indeed vendor data shows that with a good wellness program they can live to be 100.

understatement. It's more like this: suppose a student submitted this report as a senior thesis. A college subsequently granting that student a degree in anything other than Advanced Ignorance could lose its accreditation.

Page references in that report are cited in this section. The outfit that posted it is called the Wellness Council of America, or WELCOA (www.WELCOA.org), also based in Nebraska. For those of you unfamiliar with WELCOA, here's an interesting historical tidbit: as you can see from the screenshot below, WELCOA was founded by none other than the world-renowned inventor of the all-you-can-eat self-service restaurant, Warren Buffet.


WELCOA OVERVIEW

The Wellness Council of America (WELCOA) was established as a national not-for-profit organization in the mid 1980's through the efforts of a number of forward-thinking business and health leaders. Drawing on the vision originally set forth by William Kizer, Sr., Chairman Emeritus of Central States Indemnity, and WELCOA founding Directors that included Dr. Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Warren Buffet, Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, WELCOA has helped influence the face of workplace wellness in the U.S.

In addition to Mr. Buffet, the Governor of Nebraska is also heavily involved in Nebraska's wellnessoptions [sic][34] program. He made a

34 "sic" for wellnessoptions applies both to the lack of spacing between the words and not capitalizing the proper name. Imagine e.e. cummings running ExxonMobil.

video "to support and promote the benefits of the wellness program" and gets his picture taken with participants because he "wants to be a part of individual success stories." He has also presided at awards luncheons and other festivities.

Mr. Buffet and Governor Heineman are mere supporting actors, though. The lead actor in the Nebraska drama, making its second appearance in *Surviving Workplace Wellness*, is Health Fitness Corporation (HFC), the company that showed savings by making the world spin backwards.

HFC is not alone in cameos. Like a Dickens novel or the *Seinfeld* finale or *Curious George Gets a Medal*, other characters we've met along the way in *Surviving Workplace Wellness* reappear, as the screenshot on page 149 shows the names of the committee members who gave Nebraska their award.

With all these characters involved—especially a governor seeking photo ops—it won't come as a surprise that no wellness program in history has lied more blatantly at taxpayer expense. (The consultants in North Carolina Medicaid also lied blatantly at taxpayer expense, but theirs wasn't technically a wellness program.)

Here is the Reader's Digest version of events, as recounted in the WELCOA Nebraska case study. The wellnessoptions program was rolled out in 2009, and by 2011 had already won the Innovations Award from the Council of State Governments, the WELCOA Gold Well Workplace Award and, as we'll see, the C. Everett Koop Award. Nebraska's outcomes included a 40 percent increase in diagnoses for the 5199 screened employees (mentioned in Chapter 3), "life-saving, cost saving catches" on 514 people with "early-stage cancer," a 3 percent reduction in risk among participants, and even a 3 percent reduction in prescriptions, netting out to a savings of $4.2-million.

"How many times," asks Michael Josephson, who runs an eponymous ethics institute, "do you get to lie before you are a liar?" Whatever that threshold is, the Nebraska program is over it. You can find three lies in that one previous paragraph without breaking a sweat.

Lie #1

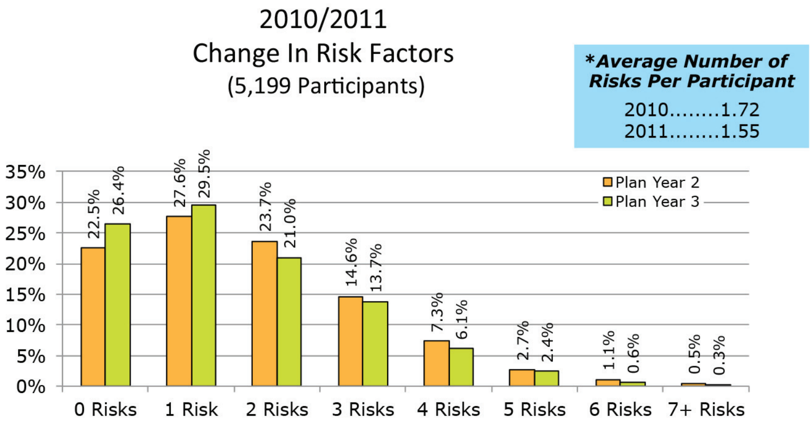
The lies start on page 15, where the state moves from boasting about hyperdiagnosis to boasting about reduced utilization of medical resources. They claim a reduction of prescriptions for those diagnoses of 3 percent.[35] You might wonder what happened to that 40 percent they just diagnosed. Why weren't they medicated? Were they told: "No need to do anything about it, but tomorrow you could get a heart attack and drop dead <poof>"? In that case, why tell them at all? Why even screen them if you don't intend to tell them—and/or make sure they get treatment after you tell them?

Unless you believe they didn't tell these unfortunately hyperdiagnosed state employees that they needed to do something about their diagnosis, either the 40 percent rate of new diagnoses or the 3 percent reduction in prescriptions must be a lie. To quote the immortal words of the great philosophers, Dire Straits: "If two men say they're Jesus, one of them must be wrong."

What these 40 percent didn't do, wellness program or no wellness program, is reduce their risk factors. Only 3 percent did that. That's not immediately obvious from this screenshot, but this is where the mantra comes in: you need to actually read this graph on Page 11 (if actually

35 Some readers might want me to quote the report directly so they can see the exact meaning the vendor is trying to convey without my twisting their words around. Fine, be that way. Here goes: "The total number of scripts filled within the Wellness Plan reduced 3% last plan year." How'd that work out for ya?

reading the graph seems taxing, you're not alone–obviously the Koop Committee members couldn't have been bothered either):



# of Risks	**Plan Year 2 %**	**Plan Year 3 %**
0-2 Risks (Low Risk)	73.8%	76.9%
3-4 Risks (Moderate Risk)	21.9%	19.8%
5+ Risks (High Risk)	4.2%	3.3%

*Statistically significant change

Specifically, the table at the bottom of the graph shows that only about 3 percent of participants (!) reduced their risk factors.[36] That works out to 161 state employees overall. At first impression 161 employees out of an entire state may seem like a low number. However, a first impression can be deceiving. In this case, though, it isn't the slightest bit deceiving: 161 really is a low number. Not just your garden-variety low number but rather a ridiculously low number, when you consider that dropouts and non-participants whose risk factors climbed weren't counted.

In sum, despite all the hype and expense, this program essentially had no impact, according to the state's very own graph with their very own phony participants-only outcomes in it.

36 That's a 0.9 percent reduction in the 5+ risk population and a 2.1 percent reduction in the 3-4 risk population, the second and third line at the bottom of the graph.

The Nebraska Program at Work: Looks Like They Don't Lie Only About Their Outcomes

The following email was received at ***Surviving Workplace Wellness*** world headquarters shortly after the ***Omaha World Herald*** article appeared in print. We wonder if the Governor "wants to be a part" of this individual story.

> Last year a family member of mine was on the Nebraska wellness program and he completed all 3 steps that were required of him, but then after the fact they told him he could not sign up for it again this year because he did not perform any of the coaching talks. That was a lie —he performed all 3 coaching events, but we had no way to prove it. I think they purposefully wanted him off because he has a lot of health issues, and therefore it cost them a lot of money. Now we are paying over $1000 MORE in premiums this year and more for prescriptions because he could not re-enroll in the wellness program. At first I couldn't figure out how they could have lost the record of all 3 coaching events, but now I know, they no longer wanted him in their program because it was skewing their results.

Lie #2

Like starting the y-axis at whatever point they choose, claiming massive savings on one page (p.15) but only a trivial risk reduction among active motivated participants on another page (p.11), and then hoping nobody does the division is becoming an industry tradition, pioneered in the last chapter by Staywell and Mercer for British Petroleum. Dividing the state's alleged $4.1-million in savings by those 161 people whose risk factors declined yields about $25,000/Nebraska employee/year in Bialysavings.

Lie #3

Those two were just warm-up lies. The lie that proved their undoing was claiming that they had made "life-saving, cost-saving catches" of 514 people with "early stage cancer."

Let's very generously assume that every one of the 5199 people on the screenshot on the previous page all had cancer screens. With this assumption or anything like it, Nebraska's cancer rate (514 cancers/5199 people) would exceed Love Canal's by at least 40 times. Unless Nebraska's statehouse sits atop a toxic waste dump, that incidence rate is obvious nonsense to anyone in this field, as are the other two lies.

And yet, that nonsense won Nebraska the wellness ignorati's highest honor, the C.Everett Koop Award, for 2012. You might ask how such obvious nonsense can win any award, but as another wag put it, "nonsensical claims are part of the award criteria." (This wag won't let his name be used now, but intends to reveal his identity down the road.)

Most states would have called for an investigation, seeing their tax dollars used to lie, especially about cancer victims. Instead, because their Governor had staked a fair amount of political capital and a whole bunch of smiling pictures on this program, when this lie was pointed out publicly the state's program sponsors did their best Sergeant Schultz impression.

That should have ended it, as the wellness ignorati have learned that not defending or even acknowledging the indefensible shortens the news cycle, and their HR customers are not likely to notice a short news cycle. Unfortunately, there was one little problem this time: HFC actually admitted they lied. Specifically, they admitted that most of those 514 cancer victims on whom they made “life-saving catches” never actually had cancer. Therefore, to say HFC saved their lives would be like saying they saved 514 lives by getting 514 people to buckle their seat belts. In an interview with the *Omaha World Herald* (July 15, 2013), HFC’s Chief Medical Officer tried to explain the lie away by describing the difference between saving the lives of 514 cancer victims and pretending that 514 well people had cancer as “semantics.”

This little slip-up almost got HFC in trouble. In wellness, lying is perfectly acceptable. As we’ve seen in this chapter and elsewhere, lying is the main technique used to show savings, since achieving actual savings by doing exactly the opposite of what all guidelines tell you to do simply isn’t possible. Just don’t admit it and no one will notice. As of this writing, no other member of the wellness ignorati except Milliman (which changed its position 180 degrees on how Community Care of North Carolina achieved its Bialysavings) has even implicitly acknowledged they lied, even after they were caught.

Admitting the lie was HFC’s mistake. Telling lies has consequences, so as soon as HFC’s admission of guilt appeared in print, the Koop Award committee immediately convened and revoked the Nebraska program’s award.

Gotcha. That last sentence was just a test of the Emergency Wellness System. In the event of a real wellness emergency, you would be instructed to send about $500 of your paycheck directly to your HR department, to be divided among wellness vendors promising Bialysavings, screeners supervised by personnel, and a broker collecting their revenue stream. What really happened, of course, was that the Koop Award Committee convened and said their cronies could keep their award anyway because, as noted earlier, who better embodied cronyism than Dr. C. Everett Koop? They determined that HFC didn't lie, but rather made an "error." No surprise here—if many of the names on this screenshot of some Koop Committee members look familiar, it's because previous chapters have revealed their expertise in making "errors."

The Koop Committee: Hey, Butch, Who Are Those Guys?

Board of Directors

Founding Honorary Chairman

C. Everett Koop, MD (1916 - 2013)

Chairman

Carson E. Beadle, Chairman and Co-Founder, Security Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York

President & CEO

Ron Z. Goetzel, PhD, Emory University Institute for Health and Productivity Studies and Truven Health Analytics (formerly the Healthcare Business of Thomson Reuters)

Chief Science Officer

James F. Fries, MD, Stanford University School of Medicine

Secretary/Treasurer

James Wiehl, JD, Fulbright & Jaworski

Steve Aldana, PhD, WellSteps
David R. Anderson, PhD, StayWell Health Management
David Ballard, PsyD, MBA, American Psychological Association
Dan Gold, PhD, Mercer

The good news is, like the industry strategy in Chapter 6 of not counting people who get worse when "reconciling" savings on people who get better, this expanded definition of "error" could also have legs. For instance, instead of denying their nuclear programs, countries could say they are building warheads by mistake.

For its part, Nebraska refuses to return the award voluntarily, recalling the immortal words of the great Senator S.I. Hayakawa during the debate about whether to return the Canal Zone to Panama: “We stole it, fair and square.” I don’t hear Mr. Buffet clamoring for justice either. I’d be surprised if Nebraska’s GOP governor and Warren Buffett[37] agree on anything else.

Meanwhile, the rest of the country’s reaction to this debacle is best summed up on p. 3 of the report: “Nebraska is already getting calls from other states to model this approach.”

Operators will be standing by, unless they drop dead first.

So What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Colonoscopy Ad Like This?

The one thing about Nebraska’s program that unfortunately was not a lie was their decision to ignore every guideline about cancer screening ever written. Specifically, “to encourage the use of preventive care,” Nebraska waived all age restrictions on screening for all cancers. Then they sent out a flyer to encourage routine colonoscopies. This flyer featured a model way too young to be getting routine colonoscopies, to drive the point home that you can’t be too rich, too thin, or too screened.

37 So that no one can accuse us of not doing our research, we googled “Warren Buffet” and “inventor of self-serve restaurants” and couldn’t find any hits. By process of elimination, we will make the assumption that WELCOA was founded by Warren Buffett, rather than Warren Buffet. In fairness, we will concede that it’s not uncommon to misspell the name of one’s founder on the official website information page, especially in cases like this, when it’s one of those hard-to-pronounce foreign names of a person nobody has heard of.

Lest any employee attempt to escape their hyperscreening dragnet, state taxpayers financed *146,080* of these reminders during the first program year alone. That's about seven to each employee, young and old. Despite all this wasted paper, only a few hundred additional people got colonoscopy screens. It appears that most Nebraskans under 50 knew better than to trust their state's wellness vendor no matter how attractive their model.