

## THE BROAD VIEW

# Healthier SG: Leveraging the workplace

Capitalising on existing workplace health promotion programmes can help improve health. **By Ng Wee Tong and Licia Tan**



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IMAGE: PIXABAY

antly increase the reach of Healthier SG through workplaces and should capitalise on these opportunities.

### Promoting health in workplace benefits

Workplace benefits can be structured to align with the Healthier SG vision. Today, many workplaces provide health benefits which include outpatient clinical and wellness benefits. These give employees access to medical care not only for acute illnesses but also chronic diseases and preventive services such as health screening and vaccinations. The empanelled company doctor may also be the trusted physician whom the employee chooses preferentially and who knows the employee's overall health condition. He may be the family doctor whom the employee wants to enrol with long-term.

Apart from individual level benefits, workplaces are engaging partners or third-party providers to conduct wellness and lifestyle benefit programmes. These health outreach programmes give employee access to health coaches, dietitians and community nurses who are trained in preventive care and are skilled in nudging positive lifestyle changes.

Workplaces are also seeking to track, predict and report healthcare utilisation of their workforce to better structure employee health benefits. Care outcomes such as uptake of healthy lifestyles and habits, prevalence of chronic diseases and cost effectiveness of treatment are being collected. This contributes to employee health profiling to better meet their care needs and curate more targeted workplace policies and health programmes. These efforts present good opportunities to develop innovative schemes which guide healthy behaviours and prioritise disease prevention. Workplace benefits can influence employees' health and is a valuable tool in Healthier SG.

Major efforts are needed to avert an impending pandemic of obesity, chronic diseases and poor mental health in Singapore. Family doctors can lead efforts by bringing work into health conversations and anchoring it as a sustained feature. Once work is entrenched as an important health determinant, more companies will enrol as community partners in our national health strategy. Leveraging existing health promotion programmes can then hasten participation and make the development of healthy workplace ecosystems easier. Innovative workplace benefit schemes can then complement and support the preventive intent of Healthier SG.

Talking about work in Healthier SG makes Healthier SG work. Let's begin the conversations today.

Dr Ng Wee Tong is associate professor and director of continuing education and training at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore.  
Dr Licia Tan is senior resident at the school.

**T**HE recent Healthier SG presented at the Committee of Supply (COS) envisioned Singapore's future health system as "One person, one family doctor, one care plan" by encouraging Singaporeans to enrol with a family doctor close to where they live. This national enrolment programme will be coordinated by our 3 healthcare clusters.

More than 70 per cent of Singapore's resident population are in the labour force and our workforce is ageing. It is therefore crucial for family doctors to recognise the role of work on the health and wellbeing of their enrollees and incorporate these within their care plans. The healthcare clusters will also need to leverage the numerous existing workplace health promotion and protection initiatives as opportunities for enrolment and partnerships. Workplaces also provide health benefits and these can be capitalised, and simple innovative schemes can be structured to align with the Healthier SG vision.

### Including work in care plans

Work is an integral part of general health and daily life. The pandemic has clearly illustrated this. Changing work demands and the blurring of the home-work divide have impacted physical and mental well-being. Then consider how work has become more sedentary over the last 5 decades and its significant contribution to overweight, obesity and all-cause mortality.

Hence, it is no longer sufficient for family doctors to prescribe the fatigued and stressed worker rest for a day, nor the obese worker a diet-control plan, without exploring the root causes stemming from work. Rather, techniques to cope with pressure at work and taking regular breaks to reduce sedentary periods may be more targeted treatments. It is crucial for family doctors to consider work as the genesis of a disease state to achieve more effective management.

Care contextualised and coordinated within the patient's community and environment also achieves better outcomes. A family doctor who considers the convenience benefits of a workplace gym is reducing barriers to behavioural change, improving compli-

ance to the care plan and improving patient satisfaction. Leveraging existing workplace health promotion programmes also maximises opportunities for better health. Family doctors who recognise the importance of work in their practice will deliver more personalised lifestyle prescriptions and holistic care plans. Work should be integrated into care plans.

### Partnering workplaces

To operationalise Healthier SG, our 3 healthcare clusters should create strong partnerships with workplaces within their catchment. Capitalising on established workplace health promotion programmes can be an easy way to make inroads to workplaces. The Health Promotion Board (HPB)'s Workplace Outreach Wellness (WOW) and the Total Workplace Safety and Health (Total WSH) programme by the Workplace Safety and Health Council are some examples.

WOW was created to support companies in their goal towards creating a healthier, more engaged workforce. A panel of service providers have been appointed to offer a suite of impactful workplace health programmes that companies can choose from. WOW programmes are co-funded by HPB.

Under the Total WSH programme, companies integrate efforts across the 3 domains of safety, occupational health and personal health as they are intrinsically interconnected. They proactively identify workplace safety and health risks to provide a safe, healthy, and conducive working environment for all employees. Designated service providers offer a suite of safety and health packages tailored to the needs of the company. The Total WSH programme is provided at zero cost for eligible companies in Singapore.

WOW and Total WSH are ready vehicles for starting health conversations with workplaces as they reduce key barriers for participation such as cost. Clusters can further encourage corporate action in employee health by providing expertise and support to workplaces which have traditionally focused on safety, and where health is a relatively newer concept. Healthcare clusters can signific-

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