

32 INDUSTRY





EXECUTIVE DECISION

It's tough at the top and if executives want to stay there, they have to stay healthy. **Vernon Baxter** hears how the world of commerce is handling its leaders with cotton wool and colonoscopies.

One of the perks of being a top executive is that you get used to the finest things in life. One of the pitfalls, of course, is that often every aspect of that life has to play second fiddle to the job - and this can include an executive's health. For some, a work-life imbalance is simply the price paid for wealth and power. It might shorten your life-span, but few get to the top by having 10 hours sleep a night and spending their Wednesday afternoons with a Reiki master. Still, when it

comes to healthcare too many executives - and their companies - have got their priorities wrong, according to leading physicians. Executives are the key components to any company, argues Dr Donald D Hensrud, the director of the Mayo Clinic's Executive Health Plan, and it's time the business world starting protecting its assets. "We are not saying that these executives are more important as people," reasons Hensrud, "but an investment in an executive is an investment in the company."

Hensrud points to the recent untimely deaths of McDonalds' CEOs, Jim Cantalupo and Charlie Bell as examples of how - rightly or wrongly - unhealthy executives are linked to unhealthy economic performance. An employee of the company for 28 years, Cantalupo was made CEO in January 2003. Just 15 months later he died of a myocardial infarction at age 60. His successor, Bell, was diagnosed with colon

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cancer within weeks of taking the role and died less than a year later. He was only 44 years old. Stock prices tumbled in the wake of the deaths and international press waxed lyrical on the 'obvious' dangers of the 'McDonald's diet'.

As people unused to doing things by half, executives can be ideal patients, claims Dr Kevin Waters, director of Duke University's Executive Health Program. "This can be a good demographic to treat because they are highly motivated people," he says. "Once you make them realise what they have to do and how important it is then most of them are really willing to make those changes." From a business sense, it is understandably difficult to pitch executive health programmes to the top brass. They need to be convinced to pour time and resources into a project with an indefinite timeline, questionable returns and no get-out clause - themselves. But once an executive is on board, it can be the most worthwhile investment they'll ever make.

THE TEST OF TIME

Top executives face the same problems that any individual does with health-care - busy physicians and a long line at the MRI machine. The difference is that executives have the resources to skip to the front of the queue.

"Patients within the US are pushed for time when they meet with their own physicians - they get a 20 minute visit at best and they don't get to discuss a whole lot of things," explains Dr Bimal Ashar, medical director of the Johns Hopkins Executive Health Program. These short visits are often interspersed with long waits for test results that are likely to require second or even third appointments. "Our programme here is designed for the individual who just does not have time to do all that and wants to discuss things and take hold of their healthcare in a proactive manner," says Ashar.

"With the total visit, my goal is to have all their questions answered and, from a medical standpoint, I want to have all my questions answered," states Hensrud. "We leave no stone unturned and we will take whatever time that takes." Comprehensive check-ups obviously benefit the patient, but physicians working on executive health programmes are almost apologetic when it comes to acknowledging their virtues. "My heart goes out to physicians on the front line who have 10 to 15 minutes to see a patient and pick any one or maybe two problems if you are lucky," admits Hensrud.

SPECIAL TREATMENT

To work on one of the top executive health programmes it is likely that you will have already had a distinguished career as an internist. Most of the top institutions have a rotational policy where leading physicians will be completely available to the programme for a handful of days each month, keeping staff motivated and skill levels high. Considering typical patients include Fortune 500 executives and members of the wealthiest families in the world, accusations of elitism are impossible to brush off. "There are certainly people that feel that it is unethical because this

is not the sort of care that everyone is able to get," concedes Dr Bimal Asher. "[But] patients want more than what the health system, with the current insurance scheme, can offer them - I don't feel we are doing anything unethical: we are trying to offer better care by working in a different payment system."

Asher adds that at Johns Hopkins, each of their physicians have practices that face the usual restrictions of money and time. He argues that private patients and companies are paying out of their own pocket and not through insurance. Nevertheless, to many, executive health programmes represent another opportunity for the wealth gap to widen the health gap. "There is that perception out there and there is a reality of that, too," says Mayo Clinic's Hensrud. He admits that he has thought a lot about the matter over the years, but is satisfied that the ethics are all in order. "These people aren't more important as individuals - they are executives and we are offering a specific service to that group of people," he points out.

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"And Mayo is not as expensive as people think - it is expensive because we do a lot in a short period of time, but the amount is effectively the same as any other way of going through Mayo clinic apart from a nominal administration fee." Any financial gain from the programme at Mayo is ploughed back into improving care for those that can't afford top-end treatment, Hensrud adds, citing the Medicare system as an example.

IN SICKNESS AND IN WEALTH

Most executives pride themselves on their ability to stay on top of complicated situations. If they were to flatly ignore a weakness in their company's business because they felt they didn't have time, then come the next AGM they probably wouldn't have a job. Yet many executives still have a strategic blind-spot when it comes to health, according to Dr Kevin Waters at Duke. "I see a lot of executives and every one of them has a five-year business plan that they could tell you about - you ask them what their personal finance plan is, or what their retirement plan is, and they will know it in detail," he remarks. "But if you ask them what their healthcare plan is, you discover that they mostly do not proactively take care of themselves."

Dr Miles Varn is chief medical officer at the US-based Pinnacle Care, which positions itself as a private health advisory firm for high net-worth individuals and wealthy families. Pinnacle Care is not a direct healthcare provider, rather members pay to have their health looked after by an account representative, as if their medical record were a financial portfolio. "It is very similar to the services you receive for wealth management, because every single individual has different needs and status and goals," explains Varn. Although Pinnacle Care has relationships with all the top providers, they are not commercially bound to favour any one institution. "What can happen to families that have wealth is that they become aligned with a particular medical institution, whether it is a Johns Hopkins or a Mayo Clinic," says Varn. "Each of those institutions is incredible for certain things, but they're not the best for all the medical problems that someone might have and our job is to get the best person for each problem."

Pinnacle Care's model is one that Varn feels would be particularly suited to the Middle Eastern market, where assessing the quality of the emerging providers is a daunting task. "There is obvious wealth in the area and an increasing interest in top quality health resources on a local level but also on an international level," he says. Regardless of location, Varn has discovered that wealthy individuals are normal-

ly struck by how much sense outsourcing their healthcare actually makes. "People outsource just about every other aspect of their life," argues Varn, "but they feel this is the one area they can't control - which is wrong."

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Executive health programmes are not simply about having the best physicians, states Dr Kevin Waters. It is about having the best available resources. "I was in private practice for 14 years and for me to do all what we do here would take three or four days," he confesses. "And because these people are so busy, most of it wouldn't get done." By taking a dedicated day out of a hectic schedule, executives might find they have nothing further to worry about than holding back on the foie

gras. But they might just save themselves and their company a boardroom trauma. Whether or not the death of McDonald's Charlie Bell can be linked to his diet is a moot point - what's not, however, is the fact that survival rates for early stage detection colon cancer are about five times higher than of late stage diagnoses. "A few months ago we had a patient who had a colonoscopy and he was diagnosed with cancer - that day he saw one of the best colorectal surgeons in the country," states Waters. "Two days later he had surgery. Three days later he was out of the hospital and he's still doing well." Three years after his premature death, it's difficult not to wonder if Charlie Bell might have been so lucky. **MT**

THE FACTS: Prime time

Prime Health Group is one of the largest providers of occupational health services in Australia and has recently opened a branch in Dubai Healthcare City. Although its primary focus is on onsite services, PHG immediately identified a niche in the market for executive health checks. "Research indicated that there was a need for occupational health services here and from that the executive health check was a natural progression," says the company's health services manager Vilma Ferguson.

Despite its reputation as an aspiring luxury destination, Dubai can be a gruelling location for its workforce, according to clinical director Dr Sarah Peeters. "When you look from outside people think they will have a very relaxing time and make a lot of money," she says. "But actually they have to work very hard and long hours and with a lot of international travel for executives - it is hard on the body and the mind as well."

PHG's lifestyle consultant, Latifa Soobedar says companies risk falling

behind if they don't attend to their employees' health. "When you provide services like this then it helps employees to feel valued by their company," she claims. "If you look at the top 10 companies in the world then one of the things that separate them is their willingness to invest in their people."



Dr Sarah Peeters, PHG's clinical director