How Virtual Specialty Care Helps Address Employee Wellbeing

Here's why HR professionals are turning to new technology and benefits to address workforce fatigue and burnout

By **Dr. Mary Mulcare,** Summus Global

Over the past two years, employees and families all around the globe experienced unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety as the Covid-19 pandemic took its toll emotionally, physically and spiritually. In 2021, Americans quit their jobs at a record rate, and according to U.S. labor statistics, nearly 4 million employees are leaving the workforce or switching career paths each month. A report from the US Government Accountability Office found that mental health issues more than tripled since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Wall Street Journal recently cited a study that found that more than three-quarters of workers surveyed said stress and burnout negatively impacted their wellbeing at work, with half revealing workload-related pressure was harming their mental health. Given the continued stress and uncertainty, combined with the dearth of mental health providers available across the US, employers are looking for new solutions to help address the wellbeing of their employees and dependents in a more holistic way.

The next generation of virtual care helps HR professionals with new ways to provide support for at-risk, overwhelmed and anxious employees. While much has been documented about the benefits of improved nutrition and exercise, more progressive employers are looking at other aspects of wellbeing, from stress reduction to identifying and helping reduce risky behaviors such as substance abuse, and finding ways to reduce social isolation and improve connectedness.

As a physician trained in emergency medicine, I have often seen patients arrive at our emergency departments with a specific acute concern, and with a little time and investigation, it becomes clear that the answer lies in holistically understanding their lifestyle and what makes them feel well. Only then can we truly help them in the long term. This however takes time and dedicated practitioners who understand this space.

Virtual specialty care encompasses a new and improved way to provide true lifestyle medicine that looks at the key 6 pillars and connects employees to the leading specialists across the board. Virtual specialty care also solves the problem of speed and efficient access with reduced logistical barriers to best-in-class overall wellbeing expertise for organizations that urgently need to solve worker shortages, productivity, and absences due largely to burnout.

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Six Pillars of Lifestyle Medicine:

- Nutrition
- Sleep
- Exercise
- Stress Reduction
- Risky Behavior Reduction
- Social Connectedness

The key is to leverage technology to customize and personalize connections with employees. Whether they are dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, sleeping disorders, grief, addictions, or social isolation, employees can quickly and easily consult with the right physician or clinical expert who personally fields their query, and provides the right guidance and consultation.

When Jacob* was experiencing headaches, decreased appetite and low motivation, he reached out to the Summus team for help. Upon evaluation, the Summus team immediately set up a multidisciplinary video conversation between Jacob, a primary care physician and a clinical psychologist. The team worked together with Jacob to make sure that his acute mental health issues were appropriately addressed, provided vetted provider referrals for ongoing mental health support, and completed a thorough assessment including medical, family and social history to create a lifestyle medicine plan of care for sustainable wellbeing improvement.

"I was having a lot of productivity anxiety. I'm also going through a serious life change and as a result, I'm feeling unexcited about what's next. This is generally making me overwhelmed and unproductive. Thanks to the Summus team, I now feel like I have a path forward."

- Jacob, Summus member

A flexible wellbeing solution, founded in evidence-based medicine, is paramount to sustainably addressing this conundrum for employees. Through the rigor of a comprehensive lifestyle medicine curriculum, employees benefit from evidence-based guidance for how their health can be optimized with improved decision-making about what they choose to put into their bodies as well as their minds. Employers can help this next generation of post-pandemic employees create new frameworks for their overall life approach that will ultimately lead to greater employee happiness, wellbeing and medical outcomes.

In addition, employees are often the health care proxies for their families. Lack of wellbeing and other hardships among family members only contributes to the stressors employees experience at work. Extending virtual specialty care benefits empowers employees and their families to make better, more cost-efficient decisions around their mental and physical wellbeing, while giving employees greater peace of mind.

As technology continues to make overall physical and mental health care more efficient and accessible, HR professionals need to look beyond traditional benefits for new ways to engage and help their employees. HR professionals will continue to play a significant role in ensuring employees and their families get access to the right tools and technology to become more powerful in their healthcare.

* Patient identity protected.

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Dr. Mary Mulcare is a Chief Medical Officer at Summus Global. Mary also serves as a Clinical Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medicine, and has held several leadership roles at Weill Cornell, including Director of Undergraduate Medical Education in the Department of Emergency Medicine and Assistant Director of the Margaret and Ian Smith Clinical Skills Center. She brings deep medical experience and a commitment to patient and physician education. She continues to make significant academic contributions to the fields of medical education and Geriatric Emergency Medicine.

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