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### EMPLOYEE WELLNESS: KEEPING WOMEN'S HEALTH TOP OF MIND

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Employee wellness and disease management issues and their effects on the workforce have become not only a national issue for most employers, but a global priority too. The continued increase in preventable chronic non-occupational (and non-communicable) diseases has expanded to become a growing corporate concern.

#### Wellness programmes

Whilst there are a number of organisations providing health, wellness and productivity programmes across the world, there are far more organisations that still do not recognise the value of formally implementing an employee wellness strategy and programme. Organisations with health promotion programmes in place acknowledge that a workplace wellness initiative is pivotal to their corporate governance strategy, and these contribute greatly to enhancing key employee benefits. Moreover, wellness programmes link the organisation and its employees to a sound value proposition, whilst it also incentivises employees to commit to the values of the organisation.

#### Woman's health

As we enter Woman's Month, which is observed annually in South Africa from 1 - 31 August, employers are especially encouraged to remember that women have unique health issues and some of the health issues that affect both men and women can affect women differently. During this period of time, it is appropriate that employers re-look their Employee Wellness Policy to ensure that its provisions make ample provision to address the wellness requirements for their employees, and especially so for women.



Thousands of women marched to the South African Union Buildings on 9 August 1956, in protest against the extension of Pass Laws to women. The South African Government declared 9 August as Women's Day and this day is celebrated annually

Understandably, some unique women issues include matters such as pregnancy, menopause and conditions of the female organs. For example, if women receive early and regular prenatal care, their chance of having a healthy pregnancy and post-birth recovery is greatly improved. Similarly, women should also undergo bone density screenings, as well as regular check-ups to detect and prevent breast and cervical cancer.

#### Health issues affecting women today

Women are faced with a multitude of health issues in today's world. The risk of developing chronic illness has increased along with a rise in obesity, stress, pollution, and other contributing factors. It is interesting to note that the illness that kills the most women -- globally -- is cardiovascular disease, while in South Africa cervical cancer and HIV/AIDS related illnesses are two of the leading causes of death in women. According to recent figures from the World Health Organisation (WHO), women's life expectancy at birth in the African region was just 54 years, far lower than the life expectancy of 80 years in countries elsewhere in the world.

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Despite this, there are preventative steps that women can take in reducing the rate of serious illnesses such as those mentioned.

Whilst women and men may have many of the same health problems, women tend to be affected by these problems differently. For example:

- women are more likely to die following a heart attack than men;
- women are more likely to show signs of depression and anxiety than men; and
- the effects of sexually transmitted diseases can be more serious in women than men.

Here are eight of the main issues regarding women's health:

1. **Cancer:** Two of the most common cancers affecting women are breast and cervical cancers. Early detection of these cancers is key to keeping women alive and healthy. The latest global figures show that around half a million women die from cervical cancer and half a million from breast cancer each year. The vast majority of these deaths occur in low and middle income countries where screening, prevention and treatment are almost non-existent, and where vaccination against human papilloma virus needs to take hold.
2. **Reproductive health:** Sexual and reproductive health problems are responsible for one third of health issues for women between the ages of 15 and 44 years. Unsafe sex is a major risk factor – particularly among women and girls in developing countries. Indeed, it is critical to get services to the 222 million women who aren't getting the contraception services they need.
3. **Maternal health:** Many women are now benefitting from massive improvements in care during pregnancy and childbirth introduced in the last century. But these benefits are not universally represented. In 2013, almost 300 000 women died from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Most of these deaths could have been prevented had access to family planning and basic healthcare services been in place.
4. **HIV:** After three decades into the AIDS epidemic, it is the young women who bear the brunt of new HIV infections. Too many young women still struggle to protect themselves against sexual transmission of HIV and to get the treatment they require. This also leaves them particularly vulnerable to tuberculosis - one of the leading causes of death in low-income countries of women between the ages of 20-59 years.
5. **Sexually Transmitted Infections:** It is important for individuals to protect themselves against HIV and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection, these being the world's most common STI. Equally, it is imperative to prevent and treat diseases like gonorrhoea, chlamydia and syphilis. Untreated syphilis is responsible for more than 200,000 stillbirths and early foetal deaths every year, and for the deaths of over 90 000 newborns.
6. **Violence against women:** Women may be subject to various forms of violence, but physical or sexual violence -- either by a partner or someone else -- is particularly unjust. Today, 1 in 3 women under the age of 50 has reportedly experienced physical and/or sexual violence. As violence against women of this nature affects their physical and mental health, it is important for employers and health workers to not only be alert to this abuse, but that they are also equipped to provide the appropriate support to people who experience it.

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7. **Mental health:** Evidence suggests that women are more prone than men to experience anxiety, depression and somatic complaints. Depression is the most common mental health problem for women and suicide is a leading cause of death for women under the age of 60. Helping sensitise women to mental health issues, and giving them the confidence to seek assistance, is vital.
8. **Non-communicable diseases:** In 2012, some 4.7 million women died from non-communicable diseases before they reached the age of 70, and most of these women were from low and middle income countries. They died as a result of road traffic accidents, harmful use of tobacco, abuse of alcohol, drugs and substances, and obesity - more than 50% of women are overweight in Europe and the Americas. Helping girls and women adopt healthy lifestyles at an early stage is key to a long and healthy life.

### Preventative measures

Preventative healthcare measures may seem obvious, but in practice many individuals, including employers tend to disregard its importance. When it comes to actually practicing a healthy and balanced lifestyle, common sense is often left by the wayside with many individuals harming their bodies through unhealthy living. There are a number of aspects to maintaining a healthy lifestyle including a balanced and nutritious diet, regular exercise, plenty of sleep and stress relieving activities. Besides these more obvious factors, it is just as important that women receive regular health check-ups.

It may sound a bit too simple but undergoing the appropriate screening tests at the correct time in one's life can truly mean the difference between life and death. The sooner a chronic illness is detected, the earlier it can be treated and the greater your chances of survival.

As a woman, your physical make-up and therefore your biological characteristics and requirements are quite different to those of a man. There are specific tests that women need to have at particular times in their lives in order to help protect them against fatal illness.

### Help is at hand

Medical schemes provide education, advice and support from qualified professionals on disease management and preventative care. They assist members by providing screening benefits that lead to early detection of different diseases supported by medical scheme benefits that allow members to get the appropriate medical care for their condition.

Talk with your health care provider about any screening results you're concerned with. Your health care team can recommend ways in which you can stay healthy and keep your screening results normal - and recommend what to do if they're not.

Whilst the following chart is meant to be a guideline, it is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. It is imperative to discuss any symptoms and concerns that you may have with your doctor, who may then order a blood test or screening outside of these general guidelines.

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Screening and Testing - Female	Frequency	20's	30's	40's	50's	60's
<b>Blood pressure</b> High blood pressure (hypertension) has no symptoms, but can cause permanent damage to body organs	Every 2 years if you have normal blood pressure (lower than 120/80)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Blood Tests &amp; Urinalysis</b> Screens for various illnesses and diseases (such as cholesterol, diabetes, kidney or thyroid dysfunction) before symptoms occur	Every 3-5 years unless you are showing one or more risk factor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Body Mass Index (BMI)</b> Your BMI is based on your height and weight. It's one way to see if you're at a healthy weight or obese. This can assess the risk of serious health conditions like diabetes and heart disease	Regularly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Bone mineral density test</b> Osteoporosis targets women more often and it becomes more common after menopause and with advancing age	Discuss with a physician if you are younger than 65 years or who have one or more risk factor					✓
<b>Colon check</b> A colonoscopy is one option recommended for screening of colon cancer in adults at average risk	Every 5-10 years or more frequent if there is a greater risk				✓	✓
<b>Dental check-up</b> Good dental health is important and regular dental check-ups can keep teeth healthy and spot early signs of decay or any problems with the mouth or teeth	Every 6 months	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>HPV, cervical</b> Strains of the disease are so common in younger woman and they typically go away on their own. Strains are more accurately detected in more mature women. Early detection and treatment of HPV can prevent cervical cancer before it has a chance to develop	Every 5 years  Prior to age 30, you should get tested regularly if you have abnormal pap smear results		✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Mammograms and breast exams</b> The breasts are examined for any lumps, abnormalities and screenings for the early detection of breast cancer	Every 3 years	✓	✓			
	Every 2 years			✓	✓	✓
<b>Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)</b> Sexually active adults who consider themselves at risk for STDs should be screened for syphilis, chlamydia, HIV and other STDs	Every 6 months	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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<b>Pap smears and pelvic exams</b> Important to check for any abnormalities in the reproductive system, changes that can lead to cervical cancer and sexually transmitted diseases	Every year	✓				
	Every 3 years		✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Self-exams</b> ♀ <b>Skin:</b> To look for signs of changing moles, freckles or early skin cancer ♀ <b>Oral:</b> To look for signs of cancerous lesions in the mouth ♀ <b>Breast:</b> To find abnormal lumps in earliest stages	Monthly by self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Monthly by self	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

### Conclusion

Going forward, employers and their organisations will increasingly be required to evaluate and report their employee wellness and disease management initiatives, the progress, results and effectiveness of their wellness programmes and its impact on employee health promotion and disease prevention. Moreover, the enlightened shareholder will want to see these hidden risks being disclosed and reported in the organisation's annual integrated reports. And without a proper and formalised *Wellness and Disease Management Policy* in place, there is little chance that an organisation will succeed in balancing the health components in their annual Integrated Report. **ENDS**

Words: 1,965

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