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Benefits to Close the Women's Health Gap in the Workplace

by | **Tara Anstey, CEBS**

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We are at a pivotal point in history where social change is driving meaningful conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). This is encouraging employers to take real action to advance DEI priorities in the workplace.

While positive strides have been made to address issues such as the gender pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in specific industries and leadership positions, the women's health gap persists. From pregnancy and childbirth to menstruation and beyond, women face unique health challenges that are often misunderstood or marginalized in the workplace. By investing in the health and wellness of women employees, companies have an opportunity to advance their cultures of caring while helping improve productivity, reduce absenteeism, and attract and retain top talent.

Understanding the Women's Health Gap

Despite significant advances, sizable gaps in research and treatment capabilities still exist in women's health care today (World Economic Forum, 2023). And for women in marginalized communities, the gap is often wider (Women's College Hospital).

When it comes to mental health, women suffer from conditions such as depression, anxiety and trauma significantly more often than others. Still, they face greater barriers to accessing the health care services they need. One striking statistic is that women experience depression twice as often as men—yet are three times more likely to experience difficulty accessing mental health care (Women's College Hospital). Chronic conditions tell a similar story. Women are more likely to report severe and long-lasting pain; however, it is often misconstrued by some health care professionals as psychological or psychosocial (Women's College Hospital).

Women also continue to bear disproportionate responsibilities for caregiving and negative effects from the pandemic. Take, for instance, a U.S.-based women's health survey showing that one in ten women has quit a job due to a pandemic-related reason and over one in ten women have added new caregiving responsibilities as a result of the pandemic (Ranji et al., 2021).

Building a Culture of Caring and Inclusivity

The stigma around women's health needs also persists. Women's health topics, largely the “three Ms” of menstruation, maternity and menopause (Kapoor, 2021), are often

viewed as taboo, making them not only uncomfortable for women to talk about, but uncomfortable to raise at work. Stigma also exists for many women who need to take time off for the “Ms” and other health-related matters, from mental health to chronic conditions.

Still, there is hope. Many organizations are starting to put inclusivity at the forefront of their workplace priorities to build cultures of caring. According to a Medavie Blue Cross commissioned survey of Eastern Canadians, 75% of employers that offer health benefits have a DEI strategy, and 95% of employers see the importance in offering inclusive benefits to meet diverse employee needs (Medavie Blue Cross, 2023).

We know from the survey that employees value these actions. Six in ten employees in Eastern Canada say they would be likely to consider leaving their jobs for another that offered benefits that were more inclusive of their personal life circumstances (Medavie Blue Cross, 2023). Another Medavie Blue Cross-commissioned survey shows that over two-thirds of younger Canadians (ages 18-34) in Eastern Canada say inclusive benefits that reflect DEI (e.g., fertility benefits, gender affirmation benefits, mental health benefits) are important to them (Medavie Blue Cross, 2022).

Support Vital to Business Success

Women represent a significant part of the workforce, and their contributions are critical to the success of any business. We know that companies with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions are more likely to outperform their competitors (McKinsey & Company, 2020). By supporting women in the workforce and addressing their diverse health and wellness needs, businesses can create a more inclusive and equitable workplace that benefits their employees and the bottom line.

Conversely, research shows that women are demanding more from work and they're leaving their companies in unprecedented numbers for those that offer more. (McKinsey & Company, 2022). The lack of support for women's health is fueling a high exit rate of women in senior leadership positions and may be preventing others from seeking advancement in their careers.

The menopausal transition, for instance, commonly overlaps with the age (between 45 and 55+) employees are most likely to have the tenure, training and experience to advance into top leadership positions (Grandey, 2022). Experienced women professionals may be losing out on opportunities, though, to join C-suites or executive boards because they do

not get adequate health support as they transition through menopause. Menopause can lead to increased risk of osteoporosis (Endocrine Society) and heart disease (American Heart Association) and can also impact women's mental health, leading to anxiety, depression and a decreased quality of life (Menopause Foundation of Canada, 2022). Yet, three-quarters of working women feel that their employer is not supportive or does not know how to support them during this stage of life (Menopause Foundation of Canada, 2022).

In today's postpandemic labour market, it's important for employers to be aware of the supports offered to help attract, retain and promote women and other top talent. Companies that are hesitant to create meaningful change must accept the fact that they risk losing women employees in senior leadership positions as well as younger women who heavily prioritize working in equitable, supportive and inclusive workplaces.

Advancing Benefit Strategies

The case for needing to close the women's health gap is clear, and it is evident that employers and insurers have a key role to play. One way is by advancing benefit strategies in support of women's health in the workplace. Employers can work closely with their benefit providers to offer a range of benefits to support women's health, including reproductive health services, parental leave, flexible work arrangements, mental health resources and wellness programs. By providing these benefits, employers can help alleviate some of the barriers that women face and create workplace cultures that value the health and well-being of all employees.

To start, consider the following questions as you work to advance your benefit strategies for women in the workplace:

- How do we ensure we are looking through a broader lens when building products, services and offerings for employees?
- How are we making decisions relating to women's health, and whom are we consulting?
- Are we ensuring that all aspects—the biological, physiological and social dimensions—are being accounted for in our benefit offerings and workplace programs?
- Have these strategies been grounded in credible research and data to ensure they are sound?
- How are we gathering and responding to feedback from our employees (or customers)?

Takeaways

- Women suffer from conditions such as depression, anxiety and trauma significantly more often than others. Still, they face greater barriers to accessing the health care services they need.
- Companies with a higher proportion of women in leadership positions are more likely to outperform their competitors.
- The lack of support for women's health is fueling a high exit rate of women in senior leadership positions and may be preventing others from seeking advancement in their careers.
- Employers and benefit providers should engage in conversations to understand the lived experiences of gender-diverse populations when building out accessible benefit plans with a user-centric focus.
- Offering a range of inclusive benefits to support women's health can help alleviate some of the barriers that women face and create workplace cultures that value the health and well-being of all employees.

Central to the questions above is not making assumptions about what employees want. Employers and benefit providers should engage in conversations to understand the lived experiences of gender-diverse populations when building out benefit plans. When these groups—including women—are part of the decision-making process from the very beginning, it can help create plans with a user-centric focus. This will also mean continuing to ask for feedback in the months and years to come, as the needs of employees continue to evolve and change.

Accessibility is also essential, and employers should offer a variety of options—virtual, in person, via telephone—to employees who all have different preferences for when, where and how they receive care. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that virtual care options like text-based therapy, live online therapy and online physician consultations help reduce barriers to accessing treatment and provide people with more self-care supports. These types of online solutions also give women more choice in when and how they access the care they need—whether on the go or from the comfort of home—in an urban setting or in a rural community where resources are limited.

The Road Ahead

Inclusive benefits will be key to closing the women's health care gap but must also be accompanied by other workplace

strategies to be successful. Employers can go beyond the plan and offer additional resources, such as flexible work arrangements with hybrid or remote work and flex schedules, to support women who are balancing work and family/personal responsibilities. This can also include offering access to child-care and elder-care services as well as counselling and mental health services to support women's mental health. Providing access to online resources and support groups as well as workshops and seminars on women's health topics is also a great way to supplement traditional benefits offered by workplaces. This type of well-rounded approach is not just a matter of corporate responsibility; it's about addressing societal norms and creating change. When women thrive, society thrives. 🌱

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BIO

Tara Anstey, CEBS is the director, business development, client value at Medavie Blue Cross.



Before joining Medavie, Anstey was a principal and member of the national legislative and drug consulting teams with a major consulting firm in Canada. She has over 25 years of experience in the employee benefits industry. Prior to this, she worked with a law firm in Vancouver, British Columbia, principally in its employment law practice, and as an underwriter with a major Canadian life insurance company. Legal, financial and reputational risk management is a key focus for Anstey's engagement with clients and advisors in the market, and drug plan risk strategies continue to dominate these discussions. Anstey holds a bachelor of arts degree from Acadia University and a law degree from Dalhousie University. She has also been awarded the Certified Employee Benefit Specialist (CEBS) designation from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans.

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