

IS THERE A pill FOR that?

by marsha anzalone



At some point, the healthcare industry may find a cure for everything. For every condition defined as a disease or disorder, pharmaceutical companies have worked to develop an answer. Unfortunately, the upsurge in available treatments is much of the reason that employers are struggling to keep up with health benefits costs.

Since the early 90's, we have seen a huge increase in the number of not only physical, but mental and social conditions defined as

treatable. When the American Psychiatric Association (APA) issued its new edition of the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) in 1994, it grew from what had been a slim volume to almost 900 pages – psychiatry on steroids, so to speak.

Suddenly, traits that had once been attributed to “social adjustment difficulties” became disorders treatable with medication, and drug companies stepped in to fill the need. In some respects this was a good thing – many people previously handicapped by their inability to keep a job or carry out other typical adult responsibilities became able to function as useful members of society. However, it also introduced the notion that virtually any emotional or social discomfort could be “fixed” with medication.

The APA will bring out a new edition of the DSM this year. In response to allegations of financial ties to drug companies among its editorial committee, the organization has begun work to clean up its act and detail any connections its members have to pharmaceutical developers. But will this result in fewer conditions included in the DSM?

Not likely. The 1994 edition has long since outgrown the status of “pioneer” and become an established part of the medical industry, complete with medications, generous advertising budgets and an American public accustomed to seeking a pharmaceutical answer to every need. Instead, we need to channel the flood of demand to a less expensive, more thoughtful course.

Business owners need to include their employees as part of a team effort to contain costs – after all, if healthcare expenses can be brought under control, everybody benefits. Some first steps in educating employees can include:

- When a doctor prescribes medication, they can ask if there is a less expensive alternative. Doctors often prescribe new medications when an established remedy is already available.
- Ask for generic alternatives at the pharmacy, and compare prices between pharmacies.
- To delay or prevent the need for medication in the first place, employees can improve their health by increasing their physical activity and practicing better nutrition.

As educated healthcare consumers, we can make better choices and use fewer healthcare dollars. Much as we may want to, we cannot go back to the healthcare climate that existed before the vast expansion of treatment options and coverage – but we can work on alternatives with less costly side effects.

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