

# Saving Lives: The Power of Health Risk Assessments

Written By John O'Rourke





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Vice President of Human Resources for SCA America

A chill shot up my spine when I read the e-mail from an employee who would have died had he not agreed to take a health risk assessment (HRA) during the annual company-sponsored health fair at the factory where he worked. When SCA implemented its wellness program a few years ago, one of the initial objectives was to help put the brakes on spiraling health care costs. I knew that we might be saving lives, but when I heard the details of this story and how grateful the employee was, saving money seemed so trivial compared to saving lives. It was then that the gravity of his situation and others like it finally hit me.

Ed's story was one of several medical dramas that have since unfolded across our workplace. Dozens of employees had no idea that they were diabetic or developed prostate cancer until participating in a health screening. Many others would be prescribed medications for the first time to manage high cholesterol and hypertension.

In many ways, Ed is a typical employee: a middle-aged factory worker with no known medical issues or a regular family physician. His health was just fine – or so it seemed, which is why Ed nearly decided at the last minute that a medical screening wasn't necessary.

The HRA revealed that this presumably healthy man, in fact, was a ticking time bomb. One of the first steps was to test Ed's blood pressure. As a nurse took the first reading, she was alarmed at what she saw and asked Ed to just sit back for a few minutes while she called the doctor over for a second reading. It showed an alarmingly high 220/140 when the "normal" range is about 120/80.

After a few questions, Ed was taken to a local hospital where he was prescribed some medication for hypertension and it was suggested that he not work for a couple of days to be sure that his blood pressure was under control. The company physician and site nurse asked Ed if it would be okay to follow up with him.

As a next step, Ed was encouraged to choose a primary care physician, as well as consider seeing a cardiologist for further evaluation. He followed up as suggested and was given a stress test, which was subsequently followed a short time later with a heart catheterization. The angiogram showed one blocked coronary artery. The bad news was that the blockage was in the left anterior descending artery (LAD), known in the medical community as "the widow maker." Ed's LAD was about 93 percent blocked. Another 7 percent and it is likely that he not only would have had a heart attack, but left behind a widow.

It was then that I saw Ed's e-mail to the company nurse, which noted how the cardiologist told him and his wife what a close call he had. He went on to say that without a doubt, attending a company-sponsored health fair saved his life.

Not everyone agrees that companies should be concerned about employees' health. I have heard from individuals around the country who consider their health a personal matter. But don't corporate leaders have both a business and moral obligation to be concerned about the well being of the individuals within their organization? Could you imagine a commanding officer in a military environment saying that he doesn't care about the health and well-being of his troops? How is it any different in a corporate environment?

SCA has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in new factories over the past few years. So why shouldn't our company encourage the men and women who are operating those factories to care for their health and be "fit for duty?"

By no means is a company wellness program attempting to pry into employees' personal medical issues. Rather, the purpose of such an effort is to ensure that no employee is "medically homeless" and, instead, has a relationship with a family doctor who can identify medical problems early and is helping with the management of any chronic illnesses. In visits to our plants in the U.S., many employees were honest in saying that they either didn't have a family doctor or they hadn't seen one in years. Just like Ed.

Ed isn't among those who feel that employees' health is none of the company's business. In fact, the closing comment of his e-mail was, "I am so glad that SCA cares enough about their workers to have a health fair and to try and to protect the health of their workers."

## About SCA:

SCA, based in Stockholm, Sweden, is a global hygiene and paper company that develops and produces personal-care products, tissue, packaging solutions, publication papers and solid-wood products. Sales are conducted in 100 countries. SCA has many well-known brands, including the global brands TENA® and Tork® which are made and sold in the U.S. and globally. In the United States, SCA operates manufacturing facilities in five states and is headquartered in Philadelphia. Sales in 2010 were \$15 billion. SCA has approximately 45,000 employees. More information can be obtained at [www.sca.com](http://www.sca.com).



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