

Why Businesses Should Support The Lymphedema Treatment Act

PHIL HALL | 03.06.2014 | WORDS OF WISDOM



Over the past few years, the business world has come out with gusto in support of raising awareness of many health-related issues, especially breast cancer. A slew of special events have been sponsored by many companies, and a large number of consumer product providers have generously set aside portions of their profits in support of nonprofit organizations dedicated to financing research and educational outreach related to breast cancer.

There is, however, one aspect of the breast cancer awareness story that has escaped the attention of the business world. It is crucial for attention to be paid and action to be taken, because this is literally a matter of

life and death.

Many cancer patients develop a medical condition called lymphedema following their surgery. This occurs when the lymph system becomes damaged or blocked, resulting in the build-up of fluid in soft body tissues. This creates swelling which, if untreated, can lead to debilitating physical results. There is currently no cure for this condition, but it is treatable.

Lymphedema is not unique to breast cancer patients. But the rising levels of breast cancer are being mirrored by increasing reports of lymphedema among these particular patients. Among older breast cancer survivors that rely on Medicare to cover their treatments, there is a very serious problem: Medicare does not cover the cost of the many of the compression supplies and extended therapeutic solutions needed as part of lymphedema treatment. Many private insurers are following the lead set by Medicare's omission by not offering this type of coverage. Without this coverage, many cancer survivors are either forced to pay excessive medical bills or take the chance of infections and other health degradations that could lead to permanent disability or death.

Last year, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius was grilled before a hearing held by the House of Representatives on Medicare's coverage of lymphedema-related treatments. This is her response, with bold print added for emphasis on a crucial point: "Currently, Medicare covers durable pneumatic compressors, referred to as lymphedema pumps, and appliances used in conjunction with these pumps under the Part B benefit for durable medical equipment. These

Phil Hall is publisher and editor of Business-Superstar.com.

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equipment and accessories are used to treat lymphedema and are covered because they fall under a defined Medicare benefit category. In order for items to be covered by Medicare, they must meet the definition of a Medicare-covered benefit defined in the statute. **However, it is important to note that although Medicare provides coverage for certain items, it does not provide coverage for every item with potential use for a person with a medical problem even if a physician prescribes the item. Other devices used to treat lymphedema, such as sleeves and stockings, are not covered by Medicare because they do not meet the definition of durable medical equipment or any other Medicare benefit category established by law.”**

If you are like me, you will believe that this situation is in need of rapid change. And it appears that a number of people are ready to make a change for the better.

Currently before the House of Representatives is a bill known as H.R.3877 - Lymphedema Treatment Act. This bill, which was introduced by Rep. David Reichert, R-Wash., is designed to correct the omission cited by Secretary Sebelius in the current Medicare coverage of lymphedema treatment. If Medicare corrects this gross omission, that agency's example can be used to leverage private insurers to address similar omissions in their coverage of lymphedema treatment.

I would encourage you to read more about this bill at this website: <http://lymphedematreatmentact.org>. And this is where the business community needs to come in at full force. The level of passion that the private sector brings raising awareness of breast cancer and raising funds to speed a cure for this disease needs to be brought into pushing for the passage of the Lymphedema Treatment Act.

Admittedly, there is a big difference between participating in a walkathon and actively pushing for federal legislation. Not surprisingly, many businesses shy away from getting involved in political lobbying, for a number of perfectly credible reasons. But this is an issue that transcends political science. If the business world is serious about fighting breast cancer, a little more is needed than pink ribbons and good wishes – we need to ensure that all breast cancer survivors facing lymphedema are able to receive the quality of treatment they need without going bankrupt in the process. And for too many people that cannot afford to pay for expensive lymphedema treatments, the failure to gain Medicare sentence is nothing short of a slow-motion death sentence.

Under congressional rules, this bill will expire if it is not passed before the current session of Congress ends in January 2015. Clearly, time is not the ally for those who back this proposed legislation – but that does not mean that success is impossible.

I am urging business owners to get behind the Lymphedema Treatment Act and to call on their congressional representatives to turn this bill into law. The business community has done an extraordinary job in fighting against breast cancer – it is time to raise the ante and to fight for cancer survivors to get the medical care they need in order to see another day.

Updates on the Lymphedema Treatment Act can be found online at
<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr3877>

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