Forward-thinking companies and organizations are embracing the concept of managing employee health holistically to improve overall wellness and productivity. As these initiatives are designed and implemented, case managers will be key players, given the important skills we bring to the table.

The focus on employee health, including the need for greater integration of medical and behavioral interventions, was a key topic at the Institute of Health and Productivity Management’s (IHPM’s) conference held in Orlando in late March. The conference brought together CEOs, corporate medical offices, wellness directors, case managers, disease managers, and pharmaceutical industry professionals, as well as organizations such as the American Cancer Society, which has educational initiatives around employee health issues such as smoking cessation and nutrition.

As a case manager, I saw within this gathering of corporate and healthcare thought leaders an important opportunity for the case management professional. As advocates and educators, case managers are in a unique position because of our skill set, including clinical expertise, our knowledge of resources within a community, and our interpersonal skills that enable us to be the collaborators and communicators within multidisciplinary teams.

The challenge is for the practice of case management to be proactive in reaching out to employers, to inform them of our skills and expertise, and to promote case managers as essential members of health and productivity teams. Rather than waiting for others to invite us to participate, case managers need to be willing to take the lead. The Case Manager Roles and Function Study, completed by the Commission for Case Manager Certification (CCMC), not only documents the evolution of the practice, but continues to build a definitive foundation by which we can prove the value of our practice (see January/February 2006, “Roles and Function Study, Part I” and March/April 2006, “Roles and Function Study, Part II”).

Interestingly, one way case managers can become involved in employer initiatives is to start “at home.” Although we work in different practice settings, the majority of case managers are employees; we work for other firms and organizations. Within the companies where we work, we need to look for ways in which we can help provide employee education and promote wellness and chronic disease prevention. We need to explore the roles we can play within our organizations as advocates. Building upon this experience, case managers can take the next
step by helping to bring these programs and solutions to our customers and clients. While these types of activities may be different for some case managers, it all stems from our core competencies and skills.

As I observed at the IHPM conference, employers are open to greater involvement and integration of case management, disease management, and other health and wellness programs. Employers understand that they need individuals with clinical expertise, who understand the readiness for change, and who can offer ways for employees to make positive changes in their lives, such as better diet and nutrition intake and smoking cessation. Employers also value professionals such as case managers who have interpersonal skills to communicate effectively and to bring together a coalition of resources to enable the employee population to reach a higher level of desired outcomes.

Employers are targeting both quality and financial outcomes from their health, wellness, and productivity programs. These objectives of focusing on quality as well as cost mean that forward-thinking employers do not see cutting health benefits as a solution. Rather, the emphasis is being placed on providing employees with the right resources—such as disease management, wellness, and prevention of chronic illnesses—to empower and educate them. With information and support (such as health coaching), employees will be able to take charge of their own health, manage their chronic conditions, and ultimately utilize fewer acute-care resources over time. With greater confidence and care, a healthier employee is also more productive, which benefits both the individual and the company.

The clinical component of employee health also includes greater integration of medical and behavioral models, especially for a chronically ill population. Depression is the most prevalent example of why there needs to be better integration between the two models. More than 60% of chronically ill individuals also have an overlay of depression. When depression is addressed, however, there is a far greater likelihood that the individual will have better adherence to the medical treatment plan, including things such as medication, diet, and exercise.

As case managers become more active participants in employer health and wellness initiatives, we may be doing so under different names or titles. It could be that we are called care coordinators, care coaches, or health coaches. In the end, I do not believe that these titles matter. What is most important is that we are functioning as case management professionals with valuable expertise and a unique skill set. We understand what we bring to the table will help employers tackle the very real and important issues of managing employee health holistically.

Through its mission, the CCMC understands the importance of promoting professional case management certification to advance the quality of services provided to all clients, stakeholders, and families. The Commission believes that certified case managers, having earned a recognized and respected credential, have an important place at the table, participating in the dialogue that will ultimately improve the overall quality of holistic healthcare. For this discussion to occur, case managers must step into the leadership roles that will help put the necessary initiatives into place.