Americans at Work: Health Implications. Reports of overworked Americans dot the mediascape like mushrooms. According to a recent issue of the Economist, from 1998 to 2009, Americans aged 15 to 64 outworked the French by an average of twenty-seven workdays per year, and the Germans by forty.

Picking up on a similar statistic, an op-ed on the Bloomberg Media website has proclaimed, “Americans Work Too Much for Their Own Good.” And indeed, long hours spent in sedentary, hyperstressful jobs have raised concerns about the health and wellness of American employees.

These concerns drive the mission of the Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW). Simply put, CPH-NEW wants to improve the health of the American worker. The Center focuses on comprehensive improvements to the workplace -- combining ergonomic tools, for example, with change processes that encourage worker participation and engage high-level organizational support.

Keeping the Worker Healthy: CPH-NEW’s Pilot Projects Program. The Center’s NIOSH grant has led to a new Pilot Projects program. Starting in 2012, CPH-NEW will support small research projects in the areas of workplace safety and health promotion. This year, three awards, each worth about $18,000, will fund researchers with innovative ideas that could one day help make life healthier, more relaxed and more pleasant for the average working American.

Treadmills at Work. One of these projects brings treadmills to the office. Dr. Manuel Cifuentes, an epidemiologist in UMass Lowell’s Department of Work Environment, will redesign the workstations of a small group of UMass Lowell employees. The new workstations will replace desk chairs with walking treadmills for a period of 6 months. During that time, Dr. Cifuentes will collect information on the feasibility of using the treadmills on the job and their perceived physical and mental health benefits.

The treadmill study strikes at the sedentary aspect of work. Can we make the job more active, and thus potentially healthier? If we are using treadmills to do that, are they safe? What effect will they have on worker productivity? These are questions that Dr. Cifuentes, with the help of the CPH-NEW grant, hopes to answer.

Worksite Wellness for Small Businesses. Another pilot project connects small businesses with cost-effective health resources in the larger community. This project is the brainchild of Dr. Davis Weed, a clinical psychologist at Partners for A Healthier Community, Inc in Fall River, Massachusetts, a town dominated by small businesses that collectively employ a majority of its workers.
Because of size and budget, Fall River employers are often unable to offer their workers in-house programs on wellness and health promotion. This is unfortunate, because the community could benefit greatly. According to data from 2009, residents of Fall River struggle with higher-than-average rates of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and other chronic illnesses.

This is where Dr. Weed can help. His project will enable twenty small businesses to encourage healthier behaviors in their employees. Businesses will receive a list of community-based health and wellness resources. They will also receive $20 per employee, to go towards advertising and promoting healthy behaviors outside of work.

How might this work? Businesses might, for instance, invite local healthcare workers to give presentations on ergonomics or wellness -- a low-cost move that relies on the expertise of community professionals. Or employers might distribute flyers, advertising the annual Fall River Fitness Challenge, and encouraging employees to participate. (The Challenge, too, is affordable from the employer’s perspective, because it taps into community resources -- it is held at three separate local fitness centers.) Or businesses may distribute occupational health and safety publications, available at no cost from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The opportunities are surprisingly numerous for such a low-cost project.

At the same time, this research project is expected to yield data on the employee experience. Why might workers participate in such an initiative? Why might they refuse? How engaging will they find it? And ultimately, can the use of community-based health resources promote employee health?

**Work-Family Conflict: The Needs of Nurses.** The final grant-winner, Dr. Mira Grice Sheff of SUNY Downstate Medical Center, seeks to study nurses, a particularly overworked sector of the workforce. Because of their inflexible work schedules, nurses often find it hard to balance their work with their family responsibilities such as childcare or eldercare. This in turn may cause stress and/or interfere with time for exercise or participation in worksite health promotion programs.

Dr. Sheff proposes exploratory research in this area. She intends to form focus groups comprised of nursing staff and management. The groups will discuss issues of work-family balance and worksite health promotion. Specifically, Dr. Sheff is interested in how health promotion programs at work can be improved, so that they may better help nurses balance work and family. This information will then be used to construct a larger questionnaire-based study on the same themes.

**To Benefit the Worker.** Between the three of them, the projects examine work health solutions at all levels -- the personal, the professional, and the wider social context. One directly targets individual behavior by providing treadmills to employees. Another focuses on the larger workplace, by investigating the effectiveness of worksite health promotion programs; and the third looks to the wider community for wellness resources.
This diversity reflects the comprehensive mission of CPH-NEW -- to stimulate individual-level health improvements, while at the same time strengthening social resources for worker health.

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Sources
