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Massage program rubs workers' comp costs the right way

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December 17, 2004 1:31 AM

By KERRY MCGINLEY THE GAZETTE

Michael Leahy has a lofty goal.

The Colorado Springs chiropractor is convinced he can cut the nation's \$110 billion workers' compensation costs in half.

With his new approach to treating employees' aches and pains at a preventive level, Leahy is convinced that goal is within reach. He's trained 4,000 doctors, therapists and health care workers in Active Release Techniques, a massagebased, soft-tissue treatment program he invented 15 years ago.

Now he's taking those doctors to the factory line to treat common complaints like carpal tunnel syndrome and sprains at a first-aid level, which isn't considered a recordable injury by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration. The treatment saves the company productivity lost to time off to recover from injuries and workers' comp costs, and it cuts recordable-injury rates, Leahy said.

"I've always thought that we could make a really good impact for people in the work site," he said. "To do that, we'd have to train an awful lot of people to a higher standard of what the norm is."

It's a treatment that's won praise in competitive athletic circles. Leahy first gained recognition among professional bodybuilders in the Los Angeles area in the early 1990s. Today, he is a fixture at Ironman triathlons, the Olympic Training Center and with six National Football League teams, including the Broncos.

Champion Health, Leahy's physical therapy clinic, provides rehabilitation care for El Paso County and others in need of rehab.

"It's kind of crossed those boundaries. Although I'm a chiropractor and I invented ART, I have hospital privileges," he said of ART's acceptance within the medical community as a

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legitimate treatment. "It's really gone across all the different professions. The work is good. It's sound. There's an art to it, but it's based on science."

With monthly seminars that train about 200 people and a live Web cast every 10 days to all ART-certified practitioners from as far away as China, Leahy has amassed a body of trained professionals who are now contracting with companies to provide regular, on-site ART treatments.

"So now we have an army, basically," Leahy said. "To me, that's the most astounding thing. We've got a few thousand providers who are willing to focus on quality of care who put their patient care before the money."

About six months ago, Leahy began actively marketing the treatment to large corporations dependent on manufacturing. He expects his company to hit multimillion-dollar profit levels within the next six months.

ART Corporate Solutions is now contracted with or in the process of contracting with 30 companies, including Tropicana, Halliburton, the U.S. Postal Service and Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Canada.

Their interest comes on the heels of success stories like that of the Sanmina-SCI plant in Falcon. It was the first to try Leahy's plan for on-site care for repetitive strain and sprain with an ART-certified doctor who set up treatment hours at the company. In just one year of treatment, workers' comp costs dropped from \$905,000 to \$180,000.

Mary Betsch, environmental Health and safety manager for the Falcon plant, said the cost of contracting with an ART-certified doctor is nominal compared with overall savings the treatment provides.

"Our plant has achieved an 83 percent reduction in workers' compensation costs as a result of the implementation of this program and other best management practices," she said in an e-mail. "The long-term benefit for our company is a healthy work force. Our company is committed to an injury-free environment, and this preventative approach is helping us achieve our health and safety goals."

Sanmina-SCI's numbers have proved to be a strong selling point for Leahy's program. "So many companies are willing to give it a try," Leahy said. "We get a thousand companies doing that and we're there. If you can eliminate billions of dollars from the drain on companies in the U.S., that's going to make those companies much more competitive and allow them to keep employees instead of losing them to injury."

COBE Cardiovascular in Arvada contracted with ART Corporate Solutions three months ago after hearing of its potential at a regional OSHA conference. "We're constantly looking for ways to try and improve and lessen the demands of work on our people and improve our safety programs," said Environmental Health and Safety Manager Craig Snyder. "We want to build as good a safety program as we can."

Statistics have yet to be compiled, Snyder said, but some benefits are obvious.

"Right now it certainly seems from a morale standpoint that the employees seem to have taken to it pretty well. That certainly has been good," Snyder said. "When you have a program like this, it tends to bring some people out of the woodwork who may have been suppressing injuries. The program has helped us manage that, and more people coming forward. It's a good thing from that standpoint."

It's a good thing for doctors, too, Leahy said. Average appointment time is 15 minutes, so the treatment provider can see four patients an hour. That means a regular schedule of eight-hour days without the hassles of running a practice, no administrative costs and no battles with insurance companies.

Overhead is also low at ART Corporate Solutions because the staff is small. The company is made up of Leahy and marketing director Tulio Pena, who are backed by Xtomic, a local Web development company that supports the Webcast conferences, and keeps Leahy abreast of new technology.

"That's the part that blows my mind," Pena said. "We are a mom and pop organization, but can you imagine having that big of an effect on people and the economy?"

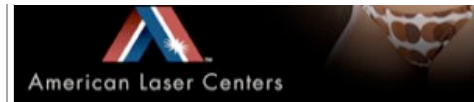
That technology is crucial to the success of the new venture, Pena said. All billing is done online and all case reports are filed online. Thanks to the Internet and the support of Xtomic, Leahy says he can continue to expand his treatment program.

"There's no way we could've done this 15 years ago. The technology didn't exist," Leahy said. "Now I think we're going to do it."

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