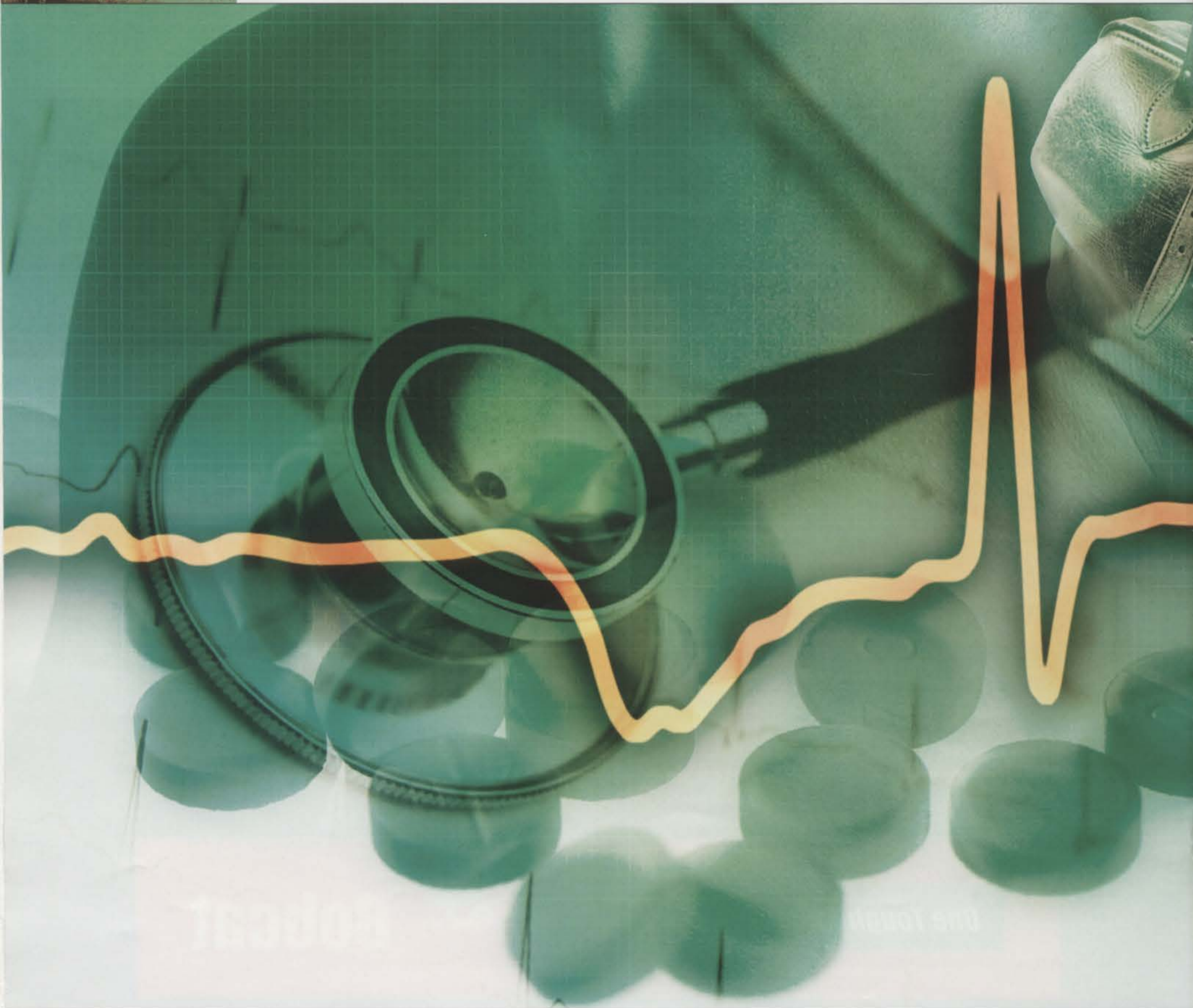




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HEALTH-CARE COVERAGE, A MAJOR EXPENSE FOR MOST,
VARIES WIDELY THROUGHOUT THE INDUSTRY



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by JOHN
TORSIELLO

Health care and its rising costs are hot topics that likely will remain so as the nation continues to grapple with the issue.

The golf course industry is like any other, with management concerned about how to provide health insurance for its employees – many of whom are particularly vulnerable because of the sometimes seasonal nature of their jobs – and workers struggling to provide adequate coverage for themselves and their families.

"It's probably the No. 1 most sought after benefit of employment our members are looking for," says Scott Woodhead, senior manager of government and membership standards for the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America, about health insurance. "The reason is that it's not offered more than it is offered. But people can hardly live without it."

The GCSAA serves as a facilitator to assist its members to find affordable health-care coverage, Woodhead says.

Jay Karen, director of membership for the Charleston, S.C.-based National Golf Course Owners Association, says the NGCOA's program administrator receives inquiries from its members every week about health care. The NGCOA offers group insurance as part of its membership benefits package.

"Many will take a quote from our program and sign up, or they might take that quote and use it as a negotiating tool with their current agent or broker," Karen says. "In both cases, they're taking advantage of the program."

Those who sign up for the NGCOA's insurance plan do so because they receive the same or better coverage for a smaller premium than what their current provider is willing to offer at renewal time, Karen says.

"As you can imagine, renewal time is when course owners inquire more," he says.

Because of the financial pressure health insurance exerts on a facility's budget, the benefit is viewed as closely by management as a weekend warrior eyeing a 5-foot birdie putt. Workers often are asked to pay 20 to 30 percent of the cost of their coverage.

"As clubs have struggled financially during the past five to 10 years and have looked for ways to cut budgets, health insurance is one of those areas they look at," Woodhead says. "Typically, they might ask the employee to pay more of the premium."

Typically, health-care costs amount to about 10 percent of a facility's annual budget, and rising health-care costs concern many.

"One of the concerns is that golf companies and clubs can't raise their green fees fast enough to keep pace with the increases in fixed expenses, such as health-care insurance," says Gary Sciarrillo, general manager of Great River Golf Club in Milford, Conn. "To that end, we're always looking for the best buy in health insurance. We involve our employees in the process, making sure we have a health plan that allows them access to doctors in our area.

"I involve our staff in the process because I want them to suffer as much as I do with the issue," Sciarrillo adds jokingly.

Because of the seasonal nature of a golf course staff, especially in the Northern states, some workers get left out in the cold when it comes to complete health-insurance coverage.

"It goes down the chain of command," Woodhead says. "Because of the full-time nature of the position, perhaps the superintendent will have coverage. But the club might be less willing to pay for coverage for people who aren't working for several months."

Smaller facilities with perhaps three or four full-time employees are more prone to shy away from providing health-care coverage to workers. Larger clubs or resorts that can have several dozen or more



Great River Golf Club makes sure its employees have a health plan that allows them access to area doctors. Photo: Bob Grier Photography

full-time employees usually will offer some type of health-care coverage in their benefits packages.

"A facility that has, say, a golf course superintendent, a golf club manager and a golf professional doesn't have much leverage to get a group plan with discounted rates," Woodhead says. "It's different for a facility that has between 20 and 200 employees."

Different options

Some golf course employees, even those who are full-time, sometimes opt to self-insure, often with the club or company they're working for contributing some level of monetary compensation toward the coverage. Woodland says perhaps 30 percent of superintendents throughout the country are self-insured. An insurance plan can cost anywhere between \$5,000 and \$6,000 per individual.

Often, there are levels of coverage that vary for full-time employees, part-time employees who work more than 30 hours and part-time employees who work less than 30 hours a week.

"Our club provides health insurance for full-time employees only," says Steve Kurta, golf course superintendent at Tuscarora Golf Club in Marietta, N.Y. "A full-time employee is anyone working 30 hours a week or more at least six months a year. I have some employees who would rather have the extra money in their paychecks and risk having no health insurance. It's usually single guys with no kids."

That's not surprising considering almost one quarter of Americans have no health insurance. Many young people just entering the work force or who have worked less than five years opt not to pay for health insurance.

The Miami Beach Golf Club offers health

insurance for its employees, most of whom work full-time.

"One of our advantages is that we don't really have any seasonal workers," says golf course superintendent Rick Reeves. "We go around the year here."

Some employees take advantage of unique opportunities when it comes time to seek health insurance. Eighteen workers at Forest Dunes Golf Club in Gaylord, Mich., a state with a strong tradition of labor rights, belong to the Detroit Carpenters Union. They belong to the union because the Carpenters Pension Fund owns Forest Dunes.

"Every hourly worker receives insurance after a probationary period," says Jim Buck, golf course superintendent at Forest Dunes. "It helps them because even when they aren't working, they can keep the insurance year-round. It costs them in the form of union dues."

Workers at municipally-owned golf courses often are designated as town or city employees and thus have access to benefits including health care, Woodhead says.

Size matters

Working for a large firm, such as a hotel chain or golf course management company, has its advantages. Because these companies employ more workers, they usually can attain more affordable health-care coverage.

"Health insurance comes with being employed here," says Robert Schmeck, general manager at the Marriott Seaview Resort in Absecon, N.J. "It's one of myriad benefits Marriott offers its employees."

Seaview employs 550 people, 55 to 60 of whom are on the golf side of the business. Schmeck says there's a copay for health insurance in which the employer pays 67 percent and the worker pays the remainder.

Billy Casper Golf pays 80 percent of its workers' health-insurance costs, according to Doug Juhasz, general manager and director of golf at the BCG-managed Wintonbury Hills Golf Course in Bloomfield, Conn.

"We have 40 full-time and seasonal employees," Juhasz says. "Six are year-round, and the rest are 10-month, eight-month or six-month employees. If you work 39 hours a week for a period of 10 months a year, you get full benefits."

Wintergreen (Va.) Resort is proactive with its employee benefits package, providing medical and dental benefits for its more than 500 associates, says Fred Biggers, golf course superintendent at the facility. The resort covers 70 percent of the coverage costs for full-time workers (32 hours or more per week, year-round).

Attracting workers

Even though health insurance can be expensive, enlightened employers view health-insurance coverage as a necessary cost of doing business and a tool to retain good workers, especially those that must be lured back after being out of work for several months.

"It's certainly a tool to keep good people on our staff long-term," Juhasz says.

"It helps keep employees here that might jump to another job for higher pay," says Don Cole, golf course superintendent at the Troon Golf-managed Teravista Golf Club in Austin, Texas.

Health insurance is a factor with the new hires, Kurta says.

"They will go elsewhere if you don't have a competitive package, and conversely, they will come to you if you do," he says.

Biggers believes good health insurance and dental/vision benefits are important tools when taking good care of employees and they're important tools when hiring and recruiting new associates.

Great River has various tiers of coverage for full-time, seasonal and hourly workers.

"We see the coverage as a way to motivate good workers to strive towards the highest level of benefits and a career position here," Sciarrillo says.



Sciarrillo

Workers' comp

Unlike health-care insurance, workers' compensation insurance is mandated in most states and is a business expense less flexible than health insurance. However, it isn't as big an issue.

"As I travel around the country and meet with owners and operators, seldom do I hear grievances about workman's comp," Karen says. "It's an issue really only for those who have sizeable claims and find it hard to get coverage again or get back a favorable rating. But that is going to be a small percentage of courses."

Sciarrillo says Great River hasn't had a workers' comp claim since he's been there, which has been four years.

"You have to be fairly aggressive with your insurance provider to make the insurance works for you and protects your property against unwarranted claims," he says. GCN



Karen

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