

# Inclusivity in Drug Insurance: A Winning Trend for Group Plans



**T**he iA Financial Group experts explored the rapidly changing demographic landscape of Canada, where the population has reached 40 million in 2023 and is projected to grow by another 10 million in the next decade. This demographic shift, characterized by a significant portion of older adults, individuals with disabilities, and a growing number of transgender and non-binary people, underlines the urgent need for inclusive practices in organizations.

As discussed in the *Benefits and Pension Monitor Meetings and Events*, webinar with iA Financial Group’s Dustin Hunt, Regional Vice President of Sales, Group Benefits and Retirement Solutions, Frederic Leblanc, Strategic Leader of Drug Programs at iA Financial Group and Alexandra Le Manac’h, Senior Advisor in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at iA Financial Group – innovation and optimization in drug and insurance plans is essential in retaining top talent.

As Le Manac’h says, “According to a Forbes study, organizations that integrate EDI into their practice can lead to up to 87% better decision-making. We are also talking about better financial performance, better client relationships and improved employee well-being.

“Having different perspectives around the table accentuates not only the richness of ideas, creativity, but also productivity.”

The metaphor of an ‘invisible backpack’ was introduced to represent the unique blend of personal history, experiences, and cultural backgrounds that every individual brings to the table. Acknowledging these differences is crucial in understanding and catering to the diverse needs of a population that cannot be homogenized.

The webinar highlighted the pervasive nature of unconscious biases in shaping beliefs, behaviors, and decision-making processes. These biases, if unchecked, can lead to inequity, exclusion, and discrimination in the workplace. The call to action was clear – recognizing and actively addressing these biases is a shared responsibility.

### The pillars of EDI in organizations

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) were defined as separate but interconnected concepts. Equity is about treating individuals fairly based on their unique needs; diversity encompasses the various backgrounds and experiences individuals bring; and inclusion refers to creating an environment where everyone feels respected and valued.

The webinar outlined three main pillars for integrating EDI in organizations: teams, clients, and community. This includes equitable career opportunities, representation of underrepresented groups, and fostering awareness and education among employees. The importance of tailoring products and services to diverse client needs and maintaining healthy relationships with various communities was also emphasized.

A key takeaway from the webinar was the idea of EDI as a shared responsibility. It’s not about feeling guilty for past decisions

but about actively contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society. This involves listening, understanding, being aware of biases, and being open to challenging existing models and practices.

Leblanc discussed the current trends in employee benefits, emphasizing the growing demands for inclusivity, flexibility, and customization, especially post-pandemic. The statistics presented revealed a significant gap between employer offerings and employee expectations regarding inclusive benefits.

Leblanc says, “Recent data reveals a significant gap in employee benefits concerning inclusivity. About 88% of employers find it challenging to attract and retain staff, partly because 32% of employees feel their employers do not offer sufficiently inclusive benefits. This realization is leading to a shift in 2024, with 69% of employers intending to analyze their benefit plans from an EDI perspective.



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- Alexandra Le Manac’h

“Traditional one-size-fits-all benefit plans are becoming obsolete. The focus is now on inclusive plans that address the unique needs of diverse communities. This shift is not just about benefits but also reflects a broader emphasis on culture, recruitment, and retention strategies in organizations. Notably, 72% of business leaders have increased their EDI investments.”

### The role of insurers

Insurers play a crucial role in supporting clients’ EDI strategies by offering inclusive coverage that promotes the overall well-being of employees. This includes revising plan designs and updating contracts to be more inclusive, especially concerning drug programs.

A key area of focus is obesity management. Contrary to past perceptions, obesity is now recognized as a chronic disease, not a lifestyle choice. This recognition necessitates a shift in how benefit plans address obesity, moving from exclusion to inclusion. Employers are encouraged to create environments where employees with obesity feel comfortable, and benefit plans are advised to include treatment options like anti-obesity drugs, nutritional counseling, and psychological support.

One challenge in including obesity

treatments in benefit plans is managing the associated costs. Strategies like prior authorization programs, comprehensive support and guidance for plan members, partnerships with stakeholders including pharmaceutical companies, and a gradual introduction of new benefits are proposed to manage this.

### The critical role of immunization

The webinar shifted focus to another aspect of diversity in employee benefits: immunization. It was emphasized that immunization saves more lives in Canada than any other health intervention. Despite its importance, the role of vaccines in preventing fatal infections and diseases is often overlooked. The risk of not being vaccinated extends beyond individual health to workplace absenteeism, chronic illnesses, disabilities, and spread to vulnerable populations.

Despite Health Canada’s role in approving and monitoring vaccines, there’s a disparity in vaccine coverage across provinces, leading to gaps in access. These gaps become crucial when considering employees with conditions that increase the risk of complications from infections. Conditions such as diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and heart disease, common in the workforce, heighten the importance of vaccines in a group benefit plan.

The panelists discussed several specific vaccines, including those for HPV, pneumonia, and shingles. The cost-effectiveness of these vaccines was highlighted in comparison to the potential costs and health consequences of treating the diseases they prevent. For instance, the HPV vaccine is a crucial preventive measure against cancers caused by the virus. Similarly, vaccines for pneumonia and shingles can prevent serious health complications and workplace absenteeism.

An analysis of current vaccine coverage among plan sponsors indicated a positive trend towards inclusion of vaccines in drug coverage. About 53% of plan sponsors now cover vaccines, representing a significant portion of the population. However, there’s a need to reassess the maximums set in benefit plans to ensure they are sufficient to cover the cost of important vaccines.

Leblanc maintains, “EDI is a shared responsibility with significant implications for group benefits. In organizations, it’s crucial to review benefits from an inclusive perspective. This involves not only examining the plan design and the way contracts are awarded but also considering the addition of more equitable and inclusive benefits for people carrying an ‘invisible backpack.’

“Additionally, awareness-raising and support are essential, particularly in addressing issues like obesity. While medication alone may not solve the obesity crisis, collaborative efforts and supportive measures can significantly enhance the chances of successfully addressing both the EDI concerns and health consequences associated with obesity.”

**BPM**

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