



Contact: Cindy Ernst
510-208-1740
cernst@iha.org

March 22, 2005

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COLLECTIVE ACTION ON OBESITY ANNOUNCED BY INTEGRATED HEALTHCARE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

Major California Health Care Organizations Make Healthy Vending Policy First Step

Walnut Creek, Ca – March 22, 2005. Obesity is a leading cause of death, contributes to long-term disability and may also result in shorter life expectancy for children born today, according to recent studies. In response to this health crisis, ten major California health care organizations, many who are also large employers, announced today they would address obesity by tackling their own workplace environments. Blue Cross of California, PacifiCare Health System, Health Net, HealthCare Partners Medical Group, Hill Physicians (Primed Management Consulting Services), Camino Medical Group, L.A. Care Health Plan, Keenan Associates, Monarch Medical Group (Physician Weblink) and Sutter Health Systems, agreed that half the products in their worksite vending machines will be healthy snacks and beverages. Integrated Healthcare Association (IHA), a statewide leadership group that seeks to address health care problems through collaboration and innovation, decided to focus on obesity following a leadership summit with statewide experts. This means that products that are lower in saturated fat, sugar and sodium – and free of trans fats – like water and fruit – will be available next to sodas and candy bars. The vending snack choices are based on specific, well-established nutrition guidelines approved by the IHA Board.

“Obesity is a major health concern for us and we need to focus on our environment in the workplace as well as on programs for our members” according to Jeff Kamil, VP and Corporate Medical Director for Blue Cross of California.

This policy marks the first time a California health care association has taken collective action to change vending machine practices and address the “obesity environment.” To date, healthy vending policy has been mandated for some schools or implemented by individual health care facilities or worksites. IHA and its members will actively recruit participation by other health care organizations and employers.

To start, the healthy vending policy will apply primarily to each health care organization’s employees, as members and patients don’t usually have access to vending machines. The initial program will affect more than 140 California sites, with approximately 62,000 employees/affiliated employees and more than 470 vending machines. PacifiCare and Health Net also are considering nationwide implementation of the policy.

“We are not talking about becoming the food police,” says Don Rebhun, MD, Regional Medical Director of HealthCare Partners, one of California’s largest physician organizations, which has weight control programs for both employees and patients. “This problem requires a complex, long-term strategy with a strong education component. We want our employees to make smart choices, but it’s one bite at a time as the candy bars will still be next to the energy bars.”

IHA has identified three action steps to address obesity:

- Promoting healthier alternatives food policies starting with vending machines.
- Collecting and publicly reporting surgical outcomes on bariatric surgery in California. The rise in obesity has resulted in a steep rise in bariatric surgery. This information will educate and benefit consumers and health care providers.
- Exploring obesity as a development measure for the groundbreaking Pay for Performance (P4P) program. This physician group incentive program is the largest in

the country with 7 health plans, 45,000 doctors, 215 medical groups and 6.2 million members. (IHA administers the program; governance is directed by participating stakeholders).

Overweight and obesity and its related illnesses are a serious public health issue with an enormous impact on employees, patients, their families and the larger health care system:

- One third of all premature deaths are related to poor diet and inactivity.
- Obesity-related expenses annually cost California:
 - \$28 billion (direct medical costs, lost productivity, disability);
 - \$7.7 billion in medical expenses - the highest in the country according to the CDC;
- Related chronic illnesses include heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer and osteoporosis; 75% of all costs result from chronic illness.

“Employees across the Sutter Health network of hospitals and physician organizations are caregivers to thousands of families throughout Northern California, “ said Gordon Hunt, M.D., chief medical officer and senior vice president for Sutter Health. “Our participation in this important program is just one more step we’re taking to ‘care for our caregivers’ and keep them healthy so they can provide medical services in our communities.”

“This is the right thing to do” says Richard Slavin, M.D., CEO of Camino Medical Group in Sunnyvale. “Healthy employees and those with a well-managed chronic illness are more productive and positively impact what we spend on our own medical expenses. As health care providers and as employers, we should be role models.”

IHA (www.ih.org) is a statewide collaborative leadership group of California health plans, physician groups, and healthcare systems, plus academic, consumer, purchaser, pharmaceutical and new technology representatives that promotes quality improvement, accountability, and affordability for all California consumers through special projects, policy innovation and education.

###