



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE AND MANAGEMENT

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PREVENTIVE MEDICINE TO COMBAT OCCUPATIONAL STRESS OF EMPLOYEES IN BPO ORGANISATIONS – INDIA'S NEED OF THE HOUR

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ABSTRACT

Macro and Micro HR issues confront organizations engaged in globally distributed work. These impact not only the work and organizational productivity but also the people delivering that work and therefore, need to be addressed adequately for the benefit of all stakeholders. In the present globally competitive environment outsourcing has emerged as a feasible option through which in-house operations/business processes are contracted to an outside agency- a method to reduce operational costs and get access to superior technologies or more efficient personnel at reduced cost. This BPO industry has been rapidly expanding in over the last 10 years growing at the rate of 40 – 50 %. There are however concerns regarding issues of health and safety that are unique to this new and developing industry. The lack of reliable and relevant information on which to base the response to this concern poses a challenge for safe guarding the health of BPO employees. Today it is not uncommon to see a person in the 30 – 40 age group to suffer from cardiac arrest, block in angina, high diabetics, high cholesterol etc.. The criminal is occupational stress. It is a costly problem to the employees and to the employers. The management across the sector is increasingly aware of occupational hazards associated with the job, but dearth of innovative techniques can be felt as small companies are still gearing up to provide employees with proper working conditions. In this context there is a paucity of empirical work on this emerging field. However this paper aims to include through a survey of specialist medical practitioners preventive techniques to combat occupational stress- as this sector has elevated our society from poverty, it also faces threats of outsourcing of health problems to our people. The results of the survey will enable our BPO vendors to enhance their health care strategies to combat the inbuilt stress factor in this occupation – else the phenomena of stress will dig a grave for this industry amidst the other threats that this flourishing industry is facing in the competitive scenario.

KEYWORDS

Occupational stress, BPO, Preventive healthcare, Pre diagnostic techniques, Asana, Lifestyle diseases

INTRODUCTION

20 years back – Have you ever heard of a cardiac arrest, blockage in angina, high cholesterol and high diabetes to an employee in the age group of 30-40 years? Similarly have you heard of early retirement, mental strain, absenteeism and burnout? Obviously no, which you have not come across - such a scenario. Occupational stress is the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Downsizing, increased workloads, high competition, growing population etc. are taking their toll. "Stress, in essence, is a feeling of doubt about being able to cope, a perception that the resources available do not match the demands made. When it persists, stress can cause physical and psychological ill-health and adversely affect social functioning". Occupational stress has become a common and costly problem leaving a few workers untouched. Over 20% of corporate employees in India crave to strike a right balance in life (McKinsey, 2009). If one looks beyond this craving there's an unsettling world of long work hours, strict deadlines, sleep debt, precipitous drop in physical activity, eating fatty foods of convenience and stress loop at home and at work spiraling into an abyss of chronic lifestyle disorders. In the present day scenario, IT and BPO companies jobs are being termed as more competitive and stressful. Even though by virtue, some jobs are highly stressful like army, police, and fire service etc. Some are relatively moderate viz. Service sectors and health care industry etc..

The BPO industry has been rapidly expanding in India over the last 10 years. It has been growing at the rate of 30-40% a year. It is observed that the top 13 companies have grown by 67.4% while the next seven have grown by 27.5%. This brings us a full circle that the industry is still evolving. Another dimension observed was that Indian BPO's have got listed on the stock markets making it one of the most important years in the evolution of this industry. (Source: Data Quest 2008)

However there is a concern regarding issues of health and safety that are unique to this new & developing Industry. The lack of reliable and response to this concern poses a challenge for safeguarding the health of BPO employees. Elevated stress levels, shift duties, high work targets, lofty income may force many towards addictions to keep them going. Call centers are blooming field of employees in the present age of information technology. People with basic minimum qualification and good communication skills are getting in the BPO industry, gaining exposure to the westernized working environment and at the same time affecting the Indian way of living in various fields such as physical, social, cultural leading to various problems amidst good pay, perks, fast lifestyle, several researches have drawn their interest towards the physical, psychological and social stress faced by these employees and their revelations are astounding. According to (Ernst & Young, 2010) India's loss in terms of potentially productive years due to lifestyle diseases is among the highest in the world. India is slated to lose \$237 billion between 2005 and 2015 due to drop in productivity (WHO report, 2010). No wonder the management across the sector is increasingly getting aware of occupational hazards associated with the job. However there is paucity of research of preventive healthcare to combat occupational stress of employees in BPO organisations.

Preventive healthcare holds enormous promise for the competitiveness of Indian BPO Companies; and for the Country's economy in the global arena. In an era when the service sector is gaining pre-eminence, the value of the individual employee has increased more than ever before. Employees with specialised skills are the focal point on whose well being and performance the productivity of a company rests. In a highly competitive corporate environment, companies cannot afford the absence of their employees due to sickness, caused by a sedentary lifestyle, etc as a poor performance at the workplace due to poor health. Both as part of their corporate social responsibility and to boost their profits, a number of firms are offering preventive health care facilities to their employees. This awakening however is only in the inception phase as one sees only top corporate like WIPRO, TCS, HP, PepsiCo Maruti Suzuki venturing into wellness measures but a vast majority companies across sectors lack practice. This paper tries to examine the empirical evidence of the relationship between preventive healthcare

and labour productivity and corporate profitability with specific reference to ITes/BPO sector. While doing so it generates awareness on the positive role of preventive health care in boosting the corporate sectors performance and improving the country's economy.

THE CONCEPT OF BPO AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

BPO Defined: Business Process Outsourcing is a general term used to describe the outsourcing of Critical, but non-core, business process or functions of an organization to external vendor for long periods of time on a set of predefined performance metrics.

BPO services have gained prominence during the past couple of years as more and more organisations have recognized the practical and enhanced value of externally delegating processes as opposed to doing them in house. BPO is not a new concept many larger organisations have been outsourcing non core activities such as IT maintenance, housekeeping and security services for decades. These activities are simply and require placement of low-skilled labour-on-site at the location itself. Critical activities were never on the agenda as companies were scared of losing control over such activities; moreover it was assumed that it would be costlier to outsource them than to do them in-house. All this has changed in the last 15-20 years. Improvements in technology in recent years have enabled companies to 'Virtually' Control processes outsourced to distant locations of third party vendors of outsourcing services. The rapid advances in internet technology and its omnipresence made this even simpler. This led to a trend of companies outsourcing more complex processes to outside vendor by keeping in touch with their vendors 24 x 7 x 365. Some of the top 10 BPO service providers in India in the year 2008-2009 in shown in the table below:

Company	Revenue 2008-2008	Rank FY '09
Genpact	4,086	1
TCS BPO	1,817	2
WNS Global Services	1,787	3
WIPRO BPO	1,641	4
First Source Solutions	1,560	5
Aegis	1,558	6
IBM Daksh	1,486	7
Infosys BPO	1,471	8
Aditya Birla Minacs	1,430	9
HCL BPO	1,077	10

Source: Data Quest July 2009 (Cyber media Research)

INDIA –AN ATTRACTIVE OUTSOURCING DESTINATION

As outsourcing has increased at a rapid pace due to the advancement in modern satellite and internet technologies, better connectivity and a constant search for less expensive labour to cut costs and achieve competitive advantage. Some of the attractive outsourcing destinations are China, India, Philippines, Malaysia, Canada, Mexico Thailand etc. India is one of the major offshore outsourcing industry as it has a well educated, talented, low cost, English speaking workforce, excellent IT and networking infrastructure a fairly stable political scenario, friendly laws ad well laid taxes and quality certified software firms. The offshore outsourcing market in India in ever growing and has produced many success stories, making India a very popular offshore outsourcing destination for IT related and other BPO services.

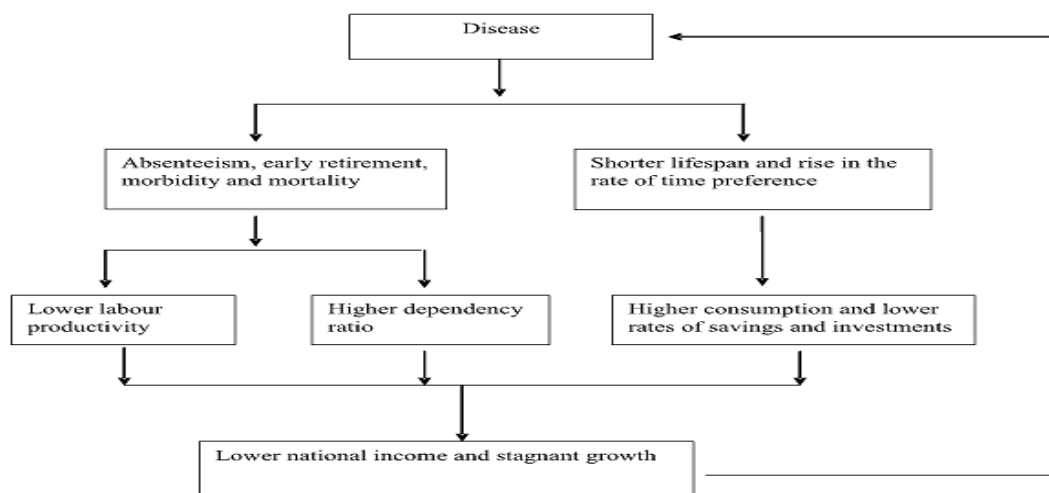
Based on the projections of growth in this sector by Nasscom – Mckinsey and others it is observed that in the year 2010 BPO industry will directly support the livelihood of about 1.0-1.5% of India's population. In sheer GDP terms assuming India's GDP to be about USD 600 Billion by 2010, 4% of the GDP will be contributed by BPO. On the other hand China and South Africa will pose tough competition to India in the future in this sector.

Occupational Stress defined: Occupational stress is defined as the physiological and emotional responses that occur when workers perceive an imbalance between their work demand and their capability and / or resources to meet these demands. Importantly, stress responses occur when the imbalance is such that the worker perceives they are not coping in a situation where it is important to them that they cope. However it is not a disease. All stress is not bad too. Learning how to deal with and manage stress is critical to maximizing job performance, staying safe on the job, the maintaining physical and mental health. However stress activation can lead to illness like Cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and mental illness.

Preventive Health Care: According to the definition by the WHO "Health is a state of complete physical, social and mental well being and not merely an absence of a disease of infirmity". In the recent years, the statement has been modified to include the ability to lead a "Socially and economically productive life". Preventive health care is an important determinant of health sincere prevention means avoiding or showing the course of a disease which is essential for a good quality of life. According to Industry analysts, there has been a growth of 25% in the preventive health care market over the last five years. Apollo Hospitals, which pioneered the concept of preventive health packages in India, conducts a couple of hundred health check-ups a day.

Besides in knowledge based economy, many of the business rely on the intellectual capital including creativity and innovation which is critically dependent on the health of the employees as shown in Fig 1.

Figure 1: Relationship between disease and economic growth



NEED FOR THE STUDY

No wonder the BPO industry has uplifted the economic strata of our Indian population providing 2.5 million jobs, It has today become a growth engine for the economy, contributing substantially to increases in the GDP, urban employment and exports, to achieve the vision of a “young and resilient” India. It is observed that the Industry is expected to witness sustainable growth over a two-year horizon, going past its USD 60 billion export target in 2010 (www.nasscom.com). The woes of this sunrise sector cannot be ignored as BPO today has become all about outsourcing health problems along with the work. Further India is facing and would face a much tough competition from China and Philippines who are gearing themselves up to win a larger share of the global offshore outsourcing work. Further the health care Industry is also seeing a facelift and many global players are entering the healthcare scenario. Health is being recognized as a basic fundamental right of all citizens and health promotion is becoming an intrinsic part of health care .Since people are becoming health conscious and this is correlated to labour productivity and corporate profitability. This study is India's need of the hour to tailor make healthcare packages and promote awareness for preventive health care through critically evaluating its positive impact to combat occupational stress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review was attempted by going through various secondary data published in National and International journals so as do enable the researcher to evaluate the scenario of need for preventive medicine to combat the occupational stress of employees in BPO organisations and the review is detailed below.

According to the world health organization (2005), the estimate loss in India's national income due to heart diseases, stroke and diabetes in 2005 was US \$ 9 billion compared to US\$ 3 billion for Brazil. These losses are projected to exceed US\$200 billion in the next decade, unless preventive measures are taken in which case, an accumulated economic growth of US \$ 15 billion can be expected.

Abegund and Stanceole (2006) in nine countries using a growth accounting framework found that deaths due to chronic diseases will adversely impact labor supplies and savings and hence countries will lose large amount of national income. As more people die every year, there losses tend to accumulate over time. It is estimated that average loss in national income as a result of three chronic diseases namely cardiovascular, stroke and diabetes -India will lose US \$ 23 billion annually in forgone income over the decade 2005 and 2015 owing to deaths relating to just three chronic diseases. In particular, the income loss as a percentage of GDP for popular countries like India will be high, around 1.25% in 2015.

Oscar de Mello (2008) country head (India) Hay Group, Reward Information Services in his report showed that, in general, staff turnover in India is 15.7% but in BPO it is around 23.5% the Country's highest due to the remuneration that is less than pretty, and also the irregular work schedules and stress related diseases. It is evident from his report that the overall compensation structure design is not Competitive when compared to general market practices and it is limited to those that can be enjoyed only post retirement.

R.Kesavan (2003) in his research work occupational hazards of people working with VDT, has highlighted that the introduction of VDT into the workplace has brought about increased visual complaints such as eye-strain, eye-soreness, blurred vision, headache etc. It is actually defined as a kind of visual discomfort that occurs due to prolonged study of visual details with reduced eye movements. In this experimental investigation optimal values for various factors like viewing distance, angle etc have been obtained.

Arman (2009) in his article reviews the work-life conditions of the employees in the call centers in India and attributes the stress in the job to the tight deadlines, monotonous nature of the work and night shifts. The increasing incidences of death in the call center shop floor due to the continuous high stress levels could not be completely ruled explaining the death of a call center employee at Thiruvannamaiyur, Chennai at the workplace.

The above review of the literature also necessitates the need for preventive strategic planning to combat occupational stress of employees in BPO Organisations.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The proposed objectives of the study are

1. To evaluate the opinion of the medical professionals as to the major stress causing factors among BPO employees.
2. To critically estimate various preventive measures of stress control.
3. To suggest measures of work-life balance and to ascertain the efficiency of preventive medicine to combat occupational stress of BPO employees.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

An empirical analysis was conducted to evaluate the role of preventive medicine to combat occupational stress of BPO employees in Chennai and Puducherry.

DATA SOURCES

Both secondary and primary data was used. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire. About 50 medical practitioners from various medical fields from both the towns were selected in the sample. Various secondary sources like Anna University Library, Pondicherry University Library, and JIPMER Library was visited to collect the data apart from referring national and international journals and internet. A well structural Questionnaire with open and close ended questions was used and data was collected through personal Interview method. Statistical tools like chi square (one sample test), ranking methods were also used so as to judge the credibility of the survey results. The findings of the study are tabulated below:

TABLE 1 : DOCTORS PROFILE

SPECIALISATION – WISE DISTRIBUTION OF DOCTORS	
Specialization	% of the Respondents
Cardiologists	24
Psychiatrists	12
Orthopedician	20
Ophthalmologist	12
Gastroenterologist	8
General Practitioner	8
Diabetologist	4
Gynecologist	12
Total	100
TENURE OF DOCTORS SERVICE	
Tenure	% of respondents
5 – 10 yrs	11
10 – 15 yrs	35
15 – 20 yrs	45
20 + yrs	9

The above Table 1 shows the doctors profile whose opinion was sought with regards to the role of preventive healthcare to combat stress of BPO employees. It is observed that medical practitioners from various fields of medicine from Chennai and Puducherry were included in the sample. Further doctors with mostly 10 – 20 yrs of service have been interviewed thereby adding value to the results of the study.

TABLE 2 : OBSERVATIONS ON OCCUPATIONAL STRESS DIMENSIONS AMONG PATIENTS

MAJOR STRESS FACTOR	
Factor	% of the respondents
Work related issues	70
Family / relationship issues	22
Health reasons	8
Other (specify)	-
AGE GROUP SUSCEPTIBLE TO STRESS	
Age Group	% of respondents
20 – 30	44
30 – 40	52
40 – 50	4
50 +	-
FREQUENCY OF VISIT OF PATIENTS WITH STRESS RELATED DISEASES / SYMPTOMS	
Frequency	% of respondents
Always	40
Sometimes	48
Often	22
Rarely	-
Never	-

The Table 2 shows that a typical stress causing factor observed by doctor is work related issues (Work load) and the age group most susceptible these days to stress related diseases is 20 – 30 and 30 – 40 age group. Further doctors find more of their patients are subject to stress related diseases especially very true in the case of patients visiting psychiatry and diabetology. This also indicates that more and more BPO employees are prone to mental illness due to depression etc or sugar due to their lifestyle change.

CHI SQUARE HYPOTHESIS (ONE SAMPLE TEST) WAS APPLIED ONTO TABLE 2 AND THE FOLLOWING ARE THE OBSERVATIONS

Hypothesis 1:

Ho: Factors causing occupational stress are uniformly distributed among patients.

O	E	(O-E)	(O-E) ²	(O-E) ² /E
35	16.6	18.4	338.56	20.39
11	16.6	5.6	31.36	1.96
4	16.6	12.6	8.76	9.56

$$\sum (O-E)^2/E = 31.91$$

The calculated value of chi square was 31.91 and the table value was 5.99 at 5% level of significance and degree of freedom equal to 2. Hence the null hypothesis is rejected and it is concluded that factors causing occupational stress are not uniformly distributed among patients.

Hypothesis 2:

Ho: Age group susceptible to stress is uniformly distributed.

The calculated value of chi square was 19.88 and the table value was 5.99 at 5% level of significance and degree of freedom equal to 2. Hence the null hypothesis is rejected and it is concluded that age groups susceptible to stress are not uniformly distributed.

Hypothesis 3:

Ho: Frequency of visit of patients with stress related diseases is uniformly distributed.

The calculated value of chi square was 5.89 and the table value was 5.99 at 5% level of significance and degree of freedom equal to 2. Hence the null hypothesis is accepted and it is concluded that frequency of visit of patients with stress related diseases are uniformly distributed among patients which is mostly always, sometimes, often..

These hypothesis testing clearly indicate that the variations observed in the sample survey are not due to chance and therefore there is a need to pay attention to the results of the survey.

TABLE 3: EMPLOYEES MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO LIFESTYLE DISEASES

Employees	Rank
IT/ITes	1
Media	3
KPO	2
Financial Services	4
Telecom	5

Table 4 indicates that the doctors consider IT / ITes employees to be more susceptible to lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes, high BP, High cholesterol, heart ailments, spondylolysis, sleep disorders and depression. This is indeed characteristic of the sectors working style

TABLE 4: MOST COMPLAINED STRESS SYMPTOMS OF PATIENTS

Symptoms	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
Tension	✓		
Irritability	✓		
Inability to Cope		✓	
Excessive tiredness		✓	
Trouble in sleeping	✓		
Anxiety	✓		
Pounding heart		✓	✓
Pains & trembling		✓	

Table 3 indicates the most frequent stress symptoms as complained by the patients in the BPO sector and we observe that most of these symptoms are influenced / dependent on their workload and work style. Thus workload seems to a major stress factor among them.

OTHER MAJOR FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

- It has been clearly established that major of stress related diseases lead to critical illness like heart attacks, high diabetes, high cholesterol and the like which could have been much under control / avoided in some cases through preventive medicine.
- About 82 % of the doctors are of opinion that preventive healthcare increases productivity as well as profitability of a company.
- Some of the diseases that can be detected through preventive health care are

Hypertension

Anemia

Diabetes

Gastro Intestinal

Heart diseases

and musculoskeletal diseases

A number of pre-diagnostic measures were evaluated and their level of importance to combat occupational stress is ranked as

Pre diagnostic methods	Rank
Regular health screening	1
Stress relieving techniques	2
Facilities for exercise	3
Preventive health care	4
Life style related advice	5

However post diagnosis medical treatment is recommended and to some extent counseling, shifting to less stressful job in the company is also advised.

- The employee oriented measures that can be adopted to reduce stress are ranked as exercise, spending time with family followed by meditation in the same order.
- The employer oriented measures to combat stress are ranked as follows creating awareness on weight control, exercise, curbing smoking, and blood pressure control and health risk assessment.
- In the future occupational stress can be promoted by the following in the same order of importance as employee, employer, government, NGO & then finally hospitals.
- It has been unanimously accepted by doctors that there is need for acceptance of the working style and culture by the BPO employees.
- Employers can take new initiatives like counseling, psychiatry and providing in-house medical facility to combat the growing lifestyle diseases.

SUGGESTIONS

The survey has brought about very interesting revelations to combat stress of BPO employees as stated below:

- Government intervention through its comprehensive care and commitment to regularly introduce innovative schemes, infrastructure development, environment protection at the Macro level and also provide incentive and subsidies to these companies or indirect subsidies cover the whole range of preventive health care. Measures like counseling, gym, health check-ups, follow – up to this check – ups etc. should also be covered by government schemes.
- Though some companies provide wellness measures they are used by employees only in certain situations. Hence government must ask these companies to make preventive checkups mandatory.
- Corporate can offer preventive health care vouchers for fixed time periods at regular intervals of time.
- When you are in Rome be like a Roman” This philosophy has to be realized by the employees to accept the demands of the BPO job profile apart from the income from it.
- The role of HR personnel has to be unbiased towards the Employees and the employers to provide a more stress free work environment.
- Providing music in the background of the shop floor, would give them relaxation to monotony and boredom in the work.
- Fixing up smiling, pictures of philosophers like Swami Vivekananda to calm the employee stress.
- Follow guidelines for arrangement of the employee work station like in the aspect of height, depth, back rest of the chair.
- Good lighting design can be followed to significantly help reduce discomfort due to glare.
- Tips should be followed to protect the employees from (CV) computer vision syndrome with respect to areas like monitors positioning, angle of viewing, attaching antiglare screen etc.
- Following tips while regularly using the keyboard so as to avoid stiffness of the hand / fingers
- Following de stress exercises during Lunch break like eye exercises.
- Sedentary work style in BPO jobs can be combated through neck relaxation exercises otherwise one will end in stress and end up in spondylitis.
- Yoga is a traditional and cultural science of India. Some of the stress relieving asana like Makarasana to eliminate physical and mental tension can be followed. The regular habit of de-stressing exercises and meditation must be instilled in the minds of the employees through regular counseling and stress relieving lectures.
- Ergonomics at work place has to be regularly audited and this is the most useful approach for preventing stress at work and plan suitable remedial actions for organizational and individual growth.

Finally as no job is stress free and also even the best effort to improve working conditions cannot completely eliminate stress, there is a need for a mental change in the employers and employee to combat stress through realizing “Prevention is better than cure”.

CONCLUSION

It is increasingly being recognized that occupational stress is a major hazard at the work place of BPO employees. This is taking a toll on the lifestyle of our youngsters. The deaths in the recent years in this sector have to some extent brought the attention of policy makers to regulate the health and safety related issues. Combating occupational stress of BPO employees has to follow 360° approach wherein a mental change is required in these BPO employees to accept their job profile and have to respond to new behaviors this sector calls for, while the employers should also promote awareness and provide necessary facilities to control their employee stress. Also the various sections of our society should understand that healthier the population of a country, the greater is its economic growth.

Further while liberalization of the economy has expanded opportunity for employment and additional incomes in this BPO sector, it has also brought with it urbanization and changes in lifestyles. These changes have had a profound impact on the epidemiology of diseases and health care demands of the people. To some extent large companies like Infosys has introduced programme like (Hale) Health Assessment Lifestyle Enrichment for reducing absenteeism and psychological stress. Similarly WIPRO runs a programme called Mitra (Friend) to take care of the emotional and physical well being of its employees. But however such initiatives are beyond the reach of the smaller BPO's which are in our Country more so than the larger ones extending to the Tier II and Tier III towns and cities extracting the work at cheap labour costs. This can be checked only through government initiatives through strict policy formulations and through public-

private participation. The role of the hospitals comes only after the initiatives have been taken by the other participants namely government, NGO, employee and employer.

No wonder India is ranked somewhere like 134 in the Human Development Index. Finally Business enterprises have to realize their stake in optimally using their health budget to reduce attrition, absenteeism, building team spirit and enhancing productivity for the mutual benefit of the various interest groups in our economy to combat occupational stress through the strategic measures of preventive medicine.

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