Disease Management
Theory versus Practice
What Lessons Can Be Learned from the US?

Gretchen Pilkington1 and Gregory Pilkington2
1 3M Health Care, Auckland, New Zealand
2 Deloitte & Touche Consulting Group, Auckland, New Zealand

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Summary
Over the past few years, there has been significant speculation about the definition, purpose and value of disease management. The existence of pre-paid health plans in the US has led to experiments with different methods for more cost-effective treatment and management of chronic illness. Various disease management programmes are beginning to show results that indicate that there are multiple components involved. Successful programmes have focused on clearly defined targets for change in a few key areas, rather than attempting to account for all variables in the early stages of development. Disease management is emerging as a practical tool that applies systems and processes within and among components of care to enable measurement, management and change. This provides a mechanism for managing the complexities of long term treatment associated with chronic illness.
1. The Emergence of Disease Management

It has been estimated that chronic illness accounts for approximately 80% of total medical expenditures in the US. Modern medical science and advances in technology deserve much of the credit for a decrease in mortality rates of patients with chronic disease. People are now able to live with diseases that would previously have been fatal. However, until recently, there has not been a significant decrease in morbidity, and therefore medical costs for these chronic conditions have continued to escalate. These factors have contributed to the increasing interest in the concept of disease management that carries with it the promise of more cost effective treatment and increased quality of life for individuals with chronic disease.

Unlike the traditional curative approach to healthcare, treatment of chronic illness requires management or alleviation of symptoms for diseases that often cannot be cured. The disease management approach focuses on the individual patient as they are affected by the total life-cycle of a disease, rather than on individual episodes of care. For these patients, prevention and wellness services are even more critical than for the population that is normally healthy, given that the chronically ill will require ongoing health management in order to maintain a ‘healthy’ status (fig. 1).

2. Who is Interested? Motivations and Objectives

Among the various stakeholders in the healthcare industry, there are many different groups that have an interest in disease management. Disease management programmes are emerging from insurers, providers, purchasers and commercial industry organisations, as they are drawn by the potential for high quality, lower cost treatment for chronic conditions.

Some common themes run through the motivations for different groups to become involved in disease management. Among them, the most attractive seems to be the opportunity to manage cost appropriately without jeopardising quality of treatment (and shared cost savings). Cost-containment strategies that limit access to primary care and prevention services limit the potential for early detection of minor problems before they escalate into major episodes requiring hospitalisation. This is particularly true for chronic disease that can result

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**Fig. 1.** The treatment approach to chronic illness.