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In 2016, U.S. residents logged 457.4 million person-trips for business purposes. Life on the road can give employees an opportunity to see new places and immerse themselves in a new culture, but it also can sometimes put them at a higher risk for contracting illness. Health risks are of particular concern for business travelers overseas, given that they can be exposed to different illnesses in unfamiliar territories and may not have the health care resources they're used to receiving at home.

As such, employers have a legal and moral obligation (their "duty of care") to make sure employees are adequately prepared for travel and have access to help should a medical emergency occur. For many human resource professionals, procuring these types of services for travelers, developing protocols and communicating emergency resources is a key responsibility on behalf of their organization.

Conduct a risk assessment before they travel

Completing a pre-defined risk assessment before travel occurs is essential when it comes to risk mitigation. From a medical standpoint, this should include an evaluation of the availability and reliability of healthcare in the region, food and water safety, air quality, potential for injury and infectious disease exposure. These factors, coupled with any pre-existing medical conditions an employee may need help managing, can all contribute to the overall risk assessment of a particular destination. This information can then be used to make informed decisions regarding an employee's travel plans to the area.

For employees traveling outside the U.S., HR managers should encourage individuals to have a list of their medications ahead of time, along with generic names, as the name brands may not be recognized outside the United States. Prior to departure, travelers should also confirm their medications are legal in their destinations. Employees with chronic illnesses or special medical needs should be encouraged to carry a summary of their conditions along with copies of their prescriptions written by their physicians. Ideally, they will also have a copy of this information translated into the language of their destination.

Be prepared to act

In the event of a medical emergency abroad, the most important thing for employers to recognize is the urgency of the matter. Human resource managers should provide their employees with an around-the-clock emergency resource. While using this resource this should not delay an employee from seeking immediate care with local hospitals or emergency responders, it should serve as another point of contact in your organization's standard emergency notification process and provide access to help for locating medical care or arranging for medical evacuation should it become necessary.

Through communication with the traveler and consultation with the local medical provider and the employer, this emergency resource – often a travel risk management firm – can help make a

determination regarding whether a traveler is receiving appropriate medical care or if a medical evacuation and further assistance is required.

HR must follow-up

Should an incident occur, it is crucial that human resource managers work efficiently to respond and follow up with an employee to ensure their health needs are met. Employees who are critically ill or severely injured may need to be hospitalized for extended periods of time during their trip or even after they return home. If an employee's condition is severe and they are forced to remain hospitalized in the foreign country, or upon return, human resource managers should discuss other relevant issues, including time off and any resulting expenses that may or may not be covered by the company's benefit plans.

Employers who care for their travelers because it's the right thing to do rather than a duty of care compliance that needs to be "checked off" help build a sustainable balance between what is good for the employees and the organization. This, in turn, could also help maintain a strong reputation for the company, since employees who feel supported by and satisfied with the company's response to an incident will often continue to be more engaged workers who foster a positive image on behalf of the organization. This positive image can not only be manifested through their loyalty to the company, but could even carry over to what employees post on social media or communicate to a news outlet.

Simply put, good risk management not only helps protect the health and well-being of employees, but also helps safeguard an organization from long-term damage to their reputation.

In unfamiliar surroundings, even seemingly minor medical issues can make matters complicated and stressful for not just the employee, but also the company. Knowing the correct protocols and implementing them in a timely manner will allow for more effective oversight of and response to an incident, and successful fulfillment of an employers' duty of care.