Custom Vac Services Ltd. of Nisku experienced rapid growth last year, and Alberta Blue Cross was there to help as the company went from 12 to 32 employees in the space of a year. Its high quality vacuum trucks, hydrovacs and trailer-mounted vacuum systems are in high demand in the western Canadian oilpatch.

Co-owners Laura and Randy Luck feel that their Alberta Blue Cross benefit plan helps them recruit and keep employees. “Most people we interview for jobs ask about our benefit plan, and we’re glad to be able to tell them that they’ll be covered by Alberta Blue Cross,” says co-owner, Laura. “They know the name, and I think it helps us get the high quality employees we need to keep up with the amount of work coming our way.”

Custom Vac Services Ltd. has virtually no staff turnover, and is able to produce about 96 units per year, from start to finish—and it’s getting busier by the day.

Laura and the staff at Custom Vac Services Ltd. appreciate the fact that they get personalized service from their Alberta Blue Cross sales representative, Jeff Stevenson.

“Jeff has seen us change and grow and it’s nice to have our benefit plan taken care of by someone who’s enthusiastic and who takes an interest,” says Laura. “Most of all though, as a small manufacturing plant, we need someone who can help us make decisions. We’re confident that the decisions Jeff has helped us make are the right ones for us. We’re a close-knit shop, and the health of our employees is one of our highest priorities.”

The BlueFlex approach

Custom Vac Services Ltd. also had the distinction of being the first Alberta Blue Cross group plan to sign up for BlueFlex, an innovative new approach to employer group benefit plans introduced by Alberta Blue Cross last year.

Offering a unique new blend of flexibility and cost control in a single package, BlueFlex is specifically geared to meet the evolving needs of Alberta businesses with five or more employees. BlueFlex provides employers the ability to choose benefits that best fit the needs of both their business and their employees—with premiums that can be adjusted for the appropriate benefit level. By structuring similar benefits into core, complementary and enhanced bundles, employers can choose benefits and options to meet their specific needs and preferences, allowing them greater freedom to select coverage levels and maximums.

Since BlueFlex was introduced, many new and existing Alberta Blue Cross group plan sponsors have adopted the BlueFlex approach for their own groups. If you’d like more information about BlueFlex, please contact your Alberta Blue Cross group representative.
Drug product Vioxx withdrawn from market, no longer eligible for coverage

On September 30, 2004, the drug manufacturer Merck & Co. announced a worldwide recall of its popular arthritis drug Vioxx after a clinical trial revealed an increased risk of heart attack and stroke associated with use of the product.

As a result of this product being withdrawn from the market, Vioxx is no longer an eligible benefit through any drug benefit plans administered by Alberta Blue Cross.

Vioxx, which is used to treat pain, inflammation, and stiffness caused by osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis in adults as well as to treat menstrual pain, is a highly utilized drug product that has been a popular benefit through Alberta Blue Cross employer group benefit plans. In fact, Vioxx was the fifth most prescribed product last year for participants in Alberta Blue Cross employer group benefit plans; and was also the fifth most expensive product in terms of total dollars spent on drug products by Alberta Blue Cross group plans.

Those Alberta Blue Cross group plan participants who have previously been prescribed Vioxx are advised to consult their physicians for an alternate course of treatment.

Health care reform update

Universal Pharmacare dropped from reform agenda

Over the last two years, the topic of health care reform has dominated headlines across Canada. Alberta Blue Cross closely monitors this topic to ensure that any potential impact on employer group plan customers is promptly addressed.

Much of the discussion about health reform has centered on the potential for a catastrophic drug coverage program, and the potential for introduction of a program that would provide federal funding to offset catastrophic prescription drug costs for individuals after a pre-set threshold was reached. Such a program would likely have been good news to employer group benefit plan sponsors facing a growing burden from rising prescription drug costs and increasing utilization. This is because such a cap could potentially limit an employer’s obligation thereby reducing drug plan costs substantially.

The issue of health care reform returned to the spotlight earlier this fall, as the Prime Minister and Premiers reached what is being touted by the federal government as the “deal of the decade,” an agreement which commits $41 billion in federal spending over the next 10 years in support of a new action plan on health.

However, this action plan does not provide a clear direction on pharmacare. Although the plan provides $500 million toward increasing annual transfers for home care and catastrophic drug coverage programs, considering that this amount will be divided between 10 provinces over a six year period, it does not amount to any significant increase in funding for Alberta and is unlikely to mean changes to existing government-sponsored drug coverage programs.

Interestingly, the provinces withdrew their earlier demand for a comprehensive national pharmacare program in favour of a commitment to develop a new “National Pharmaceuticals Strategy”. This strategy will be based on the premises that no Canadian should suffer undue financial hardship in accessing needed drug therapies, and that affordable access to drugs is fundamental to equitable health outcomes for all Canadians. In accordance with this strategy, a government task force will develop and implement a national pharmaceuticals strategy and report on progress by June 30, 2006. The strategy will include establishing a common National Drug Formulary for participating jurisdictions based on safety and cost effectiveness.

Although the agreement does not contain any stipulation that provinces must provide new pharmacare programs, this extra money will likely reduce pressure on the provincial governments to delist less critical health care services. However, the Alberta government has announced that it still recognizes a need to improve the efficiency of the health care system to make it more sustainable on a long-term basis. Rather than press ahead with health care reform, the government has stated it will consult Albertans about potential health care reform plans after the next provincial election, then host an international conference on best practices in health care in 2005 to help Alberta improve its system.

Similarly, the Ontario government has also proceeded with health care system reform in an effort to control escalating costs, announcing earlier this year that it would be instituting health care premiums and cutting coverage for routine optometric examinations, and chiropractic and physiotherapy services—which had previously been deemed essential and were funded through government programs.

Alberta Blue Cross will continue to monitor continuing health care developments and keep plan sponsors informed of any pending changes that may affect the group benefits you provide your employees.
Every year, insurance fraud costs Canadian businesses and individuals in excess of $1 billion. A significant portion of this cost is related to health care fraud.

In the interest of ensuring the best value for Albertans and the legitimacy of costs incurred by our customers and plan sponsors, Alberta Blue Cross takes an aggressive approach to the detection and prevention of fraud.

On a regular basis, Alberta Blue Cross conducts audits of providers to monitor claiming practices and compliance with agreements. Some of these audits recover thousands of dollars for our customers from pharmacy and dental service providers—money that is put back into products and services for the people of Alberta. In instances where audits uncover fraudulent, unethical or illegal activity, audit findings are also reported to the respective professional body and to law enforcement authorities.

At the same time, Alberta Blue Cross also performs post-claims monitoring and other activities to detect potential instances of benefit plan abuse or fraudulent activity by plan participants, and acts upon such instances in cooperation with law enforcement authorities across the province.

Alberta Blue Cross has zero tolerance toward fraud, and encourages customers, plan sponsors and health service providers to report any concerns regarding potential or suspected fraudulent activity.

Since its introduction more than two years ago, the Alberta Blue Cross iBlueLink electronic administration system has provided hundreds of authorized plan administrators with a secure, online way to submit their employee eligibility information, view their Statements of Accounts, order new identification cards and check the status of recent updates. In the month of September 2004 alone, over 3,000 transactions were submitted online—and site use continues to grow.

If you’re already a regular iBlueLink user, but sometimes have difficulty remembering the web site’s address, we have good news for you! In addition to the web site address you’ve used in the past, you can now access iBlueLink by going to the Alberta Blue Cross web site’s home page, www.ab.bluecross.ca, and choosing either “Secure online services” from the “Quick finder” drop-down list in the top right-hand corner or clicking the “Online services” link further down the page.

For more information about iBlueLink, or to provide feedback about the web site, call your group administrator at the number you have on file, or one of the dedicated iBlueLink phone lines listed below:

498-5925 (Edmonton and area)
Toll-free at 1-866-498-5925 (all other areas)
Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Further to information provided in the Spring 2004 edition of the Connection Bulletin, Alberta Blue Cross continues to revise publications and forms to reflect our privacy policies and practices. The revised Group Administration Guide contains new privacy-related information in the Privacy and Security Considerations, Identification Cards, and Privacy Matters Questions and Answers sections.

As well, both the Group Administration Guide (available at www.ab.bluecross.ca/gp_banda.html) and A Guide to Your Statement of Account (at www.ab.bluecross.ca/gp_banda2.html) have been reorganized and redesigned for your convenience. Check them out on the Alberta Blue Cross web site or contact your Alberta Blue Cross group representative for a printed version.

At the same time, all new Alberta Blue Cross ID cards now feature a consent statement that refers to the Alberta Blue Cross Privacy Policy, which is posted on the home page of our web site at www.ab.bluecross.ca. Please contact your group representative if you would like to receive a copy of an employee notice to this regard.

Each adult (18 years of age or over) who is covered by your Alberta Blue Cross group benefit plan should carry their own ID card (please see Important Privacy Note accompanying this article). On request, Alberta Blue Cross will send out additional cards to members for their adult dependents. Beginning October 1, 2004, whenever a child dependent turns 18 years of age Alberta Blue Cross automatically issues another page with two cards and sends it to the group plan administrator for distribution to the employee.

REMINDER: As the employer and plan sponsor, it is your responsibility to obtain the appropriate signed consent for the collection, use and exchange of personal information by your organization with Alberta Blue Cross—and to keep this information on file.

Important Privacy Note
Not only is it convenient for each eligible adult (18 years and over) to have his/her own copy of the Alberta Blue Cross ID card when they access services (such as pharmacy or ambulance), it makes sense from a privacy perspective. Presentation of the ID card or number is considered consent by the individual to use their personal information for the administration of their group benefit plan. For more details, please read the Alberta Blue Cross Privacy Policy posted at www.ab.bluecross.ca (also available by calling 1-800-661-6995).

DID YOU KNOW?
Plan members can contact Alberta Blue Cross Customer Services to request that changes to their address be restricted, should they feel this is required.
Maximizing coverage for those age 65 and over

Do you have employees who are age 65 or over, or who are approaching age 65?

If so, you should know that Alberta Health and Wellness does not automatically enrol individuals into the Coverage For Seniors program for Albertans age 65 and over. The Coverage for Seniors program, sponsored by Alberta Health and Wellness, provides Alberta seniors with premium-free coverage for prescription drugs, ambulance services and other benefits. This coverage is not provided automatically. Before their 65th birthday, individuals will be sent information about the Coverage For Seniors program by mail to their home address from Alberta Health and Wellness, and must apply for coverage through this program.

For your employees who are already age 65 or over, please verify that they have registered with the Coverage For Seniors program. If you have employees who are approaching age 65, please ensure they are aware that they must apply for this program in order to be eligible for coverage. For your employees who are actively at work beyond age 65, their benefits will then be maximized by coordinating benefits between their Coverage For Seniors and employer group benefit plan.

Make the most of your benefit plan!

Important reminders for group plan administrators

Eligibility:

• Alberta Blue Cross must receive employee benefit applications for all eligible employees/dependents within 31 days of their eligibility date following the plan waiting period (probation period). This is to ensure the new employee is not a late applicant, which could delay the benefit effective date.

• All employee benefit application and change forms must contain the proper signatures from the employee and plan administrator. Ensuring these signatures are on the forms helps avoid potential delays in processing.

• If an employee chooses to waive coverage because of spousal coverage, the employee can apply to be added on your group plan only if spousal coverage has been terminated or significantly reduced. Employees must apply within 31 days of the change.

Terminations:

• When an employee leaves your employment, Alberta Blue Cross should be informed immediately using an Employee Benefit Change form. Please advise the terminated employee as to when their Alberta Blue Cross benefits expire, and that any use of an invalid identification card is a fraudulent act.

Payments:

• Because your Alberta Blue Cross benefit plan is a prepaid program, your payment is due the first day of the month in which your group is being billed.

• The perforated portion of page one of your monthly Statement of Account must be forwarded to Alberta Blue Cross along with your payment.

• Please verify your Statement of Account upon receipt and contact Alberta Blue Cross immediately with any questions or concerns you might have regarding your statement.

For more useful tips and answers to the most common questions group administrators ask about their Alberta Blue Cross plans, please see the Quick Reference for Group Administrators on the Alberta Blue Cross web site at www.ab.bluecross.ca/pdfs/81108.pdf.

Make the most of your benefit plan!
Travel plan options allow for extended trips

Your Alberta Blue Cross employer group benefit plan includes emergency medical travel coverage for you, your employees and eligible dependents for travel outside Alberta.

Most Alberta Blue Cross travel coverage plans have a 30-day maximum. But if you have need for longer-duration travel, Alberta Blue Cross also offers an optional 90-day travel plan should anyone covered by your group benefit plan intend to be outside the province beyond the 30-day allowable period.

At the same time, if you require special coverage for employees who are working out-of-country or for eligible dependents of employees who may be pursuing post-secondary studies outside Alberta, you may want to discuss options for such coverage with your Alberta Blue Cross group representative.

For more information about travel plan options, please contact Alberta Blue Cross.

BlueFlex Update

Provider Schedule of Fees adjusted for BlueFlex plans

Effective November 1, 2004, Alberta Blue Cross is adjusting the rates paid for psychological and physiotherapy services as well as for eye exams through the BlueFlex Schedule of Fees. This Schedule of Fees lists the rates paid for services that are eligible for coverage through the complementary health option of BlueFlex employer group benefit plans.

As of this date, the rate paid per psychologist visit is being increased from $75 to $95; the rate paid per physiotherapy visit is increasing from $35 to $40; and the rate paid for eye exams increases from $45 to $55.

These updated rates are based upon a market analysis undertaken by Alberta Blue Cross and ongoing claims reviews to ensure BlueFlex plans continue to provide levels of coverage that meet the needs of group benefit plan participants while delivering solid value to plan sponsors.

If you have a BlueFlex plan and have any questions about the Schedule of Fees or would like a copy, please contact your Alberta Blue Cross group representative.

Enjoy the advantages of pre-authorized payment

Imagine no longer needing to write cheques each month for your Alberta Blue Cross group benefit plan premiums—as well as no longer having to remember due dates or submit payments by mail on a monthly basis.

With the convenience of pre-authorized payments, your monthly Alberta Blue Cross payments can be drawn automatically from your bank account the first working day of every month.

To enjoy this convenience, just complete the Pre-Authorized Payment Plan application available on the Alberta Blue Cross web site at www.ab.bluecross.ca/pdfs/80415.pdf (also available from Alberta Blue Cross Group Administration), and return it with a voided cheque to Alberta Blue Cross. You will be sent a letter before we begin to deduct your premium payment, and will continue to receive a statement each month.

For more information, please contact Alberta Blue Cross Group Administration at 498-8100 (Edmonton) or toll free at 1-800-661-6995.

We value your feedback

The Connection Bulletin is published on a quarterly basis to communicate with Alberta Blue Cross employer group plan sponsors on a variety of topics relating to your plan.

We appreciate your feedback regarding the Connection Bulletin, and welcome any comments you may have about the newsletter or suggestions of topics for upcoming issues. Please send your feedback via e-mail to connection@ab.bluecross.ca, by fax to (780) 498-8096, or via mail to Corporate Communications, Alberta Blue Cross, 10009-108 Street, Edmonton, AB T5J 3C5

Back issues of the Connection Bulletin may be found on the Alberta Blue Cross web site at www.ab.bluecross.ca/gp_grpadm.html.

Look for the next Connection Bulletin in spring 2005.