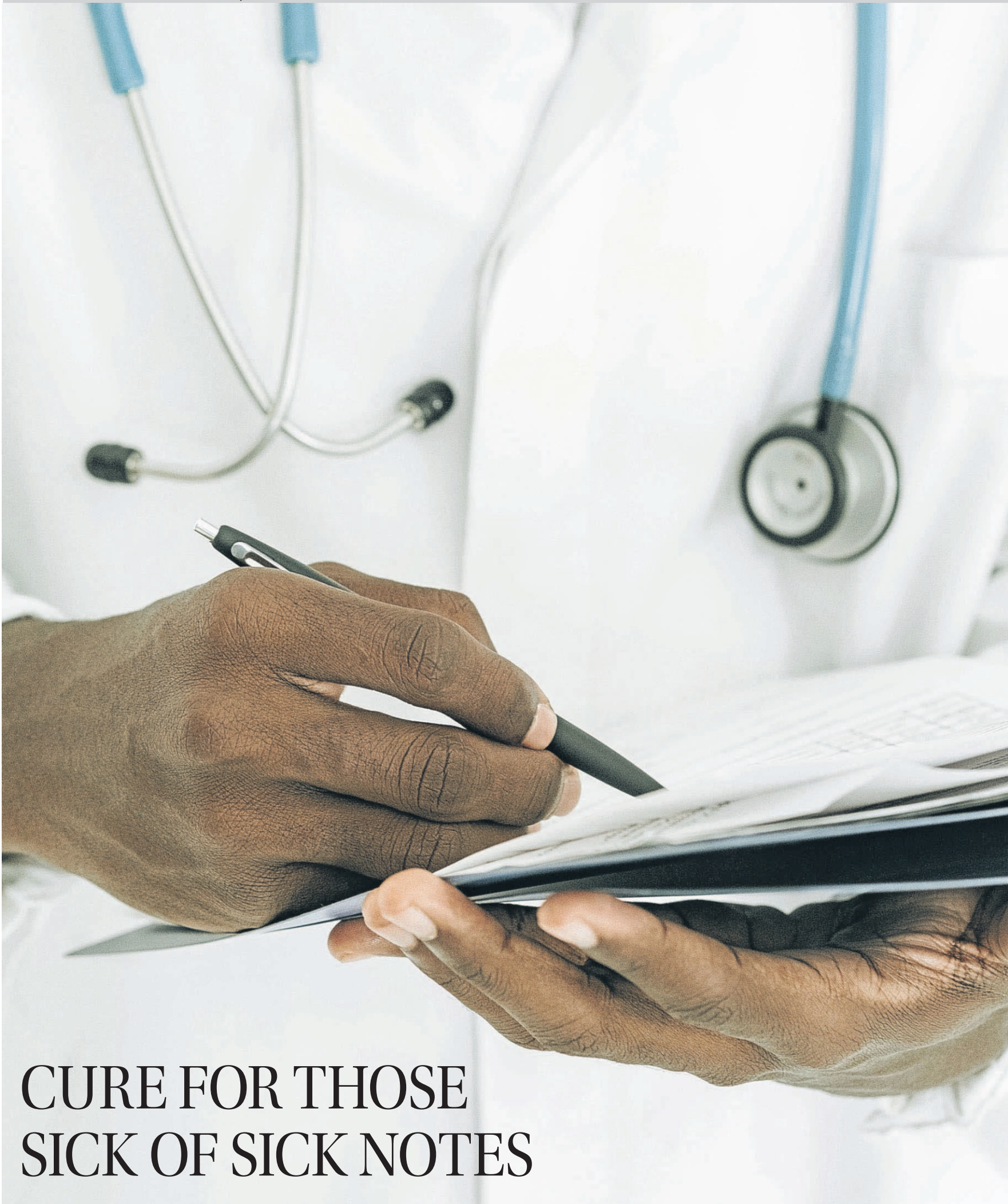




Christmas tree sellers logging high demand

DANIEL JOHNSON

WITH less than a month to go before the big day, Christmas tree sellers are preparing for some of the busiest days of the year.

An early snowfall in some regions, including a fresh dump Thursday night in parts of Ontario, seems to have stoked customer demand even as some trees are more expensive than last year.

David Thibeault heads Treasy International, a producer that also sells Christmas trees online in Ontario and Quebec. He said he is seeing strong consumer demand so far that has exceeded his expectations. Thibeault added that most other producers that he has spoken to also have good expectations for Christmas tree sales this year, noting that purchases are up.

"I think that this early snow made a big impact. It felt Christmasy ... Even in Toronto, we had snow early in the season, and so we saw that there was a major impact on the sales just because of that snow," he said.

Benefiting from the early snowfall, Thibeault said his company also tries to cultivate the holiday spirit by completing tree deliveries with drivers outfitted to look like nutcracker soldiers.

He said his company is currently selling more trees than ever, up between 15 and 20 per cent year over year.

"I already sold around 24,000 trees online, and the numbers keep going up."

Natalia Stuyt, a manager at Fallowfield Tree Farm and daughter of the owner Kenny Stuyt, said that consumers have been coming in earlier this year compared with previous years.

"I do believe that the snow definitely inspires people. As soon as there's snow on the ground, we know we're going to get calls," she said.

Stuyt noted that demand for Christmas trees has been rising over the past five years, but it has started to plateau. Now, she said, Fallowfield Tree Farm gets a lot of repeat customers.

Stuyt said that the family business typically starts to get inquiries about tree purchases at the end of the fall, as soon as Halloween ends.

"And then we get a huge influx of calls as soon as the first snow comes or as soon as cold weather starts coming," she said.

By the end of November, Stuyt said demand for Christmas trees sharply rises, and there are even some purchases after the Dec. 25 holiday. But by Jan. 1, there are no more inquiries or purchases.

Doug Drysdale, the president of Drysdale Tree Farms Ltd., said his business also saw a bump during the COVID-19 pandemic that has remained. Year-to-year, he said, demand remains consistent, with a part of the population choosing to get a fresh-cut tree each year.

Drysdale said demand this year appears to be consistent with previous years so far, but the early snowfall "definitely gets people in the spirit."

"By the weekend, virtually all of the tree lots in Southern Ontario will have trees on their lot, and then they'll be ready for this weekend and next weekend, which will be the two busiest weekends," he said.

Drysdale added that despite consumers facing some economic pressures, Christmas trees are a "once-a-year purchase" that many buyers will find the room for in their budget.

But some who purchase a tree will be facing higher prices. Drysdale said every business he knows has been dealing with rising costs.

"In order to cope with those increases, just like any other farm or any other business, you've got to raise your prices a little bit to try and offset some of those costs which you're incurring on a daily basis," he said.

As a result, Drysdale said his businesses raised prices about two per cent this year.

One of the challenges Drysdale Tree Farms has faced this year included a drought during the summer, which increased the mortality of seedlings it planted.

"You've spent a lot of money to plant the trees and get the seedlings in the ground, and then when they die, that money's gone. And then it takes eight to 10 years to grow a tree," he said.

Meanwhile, Stuyt said Fallowfield Tree Farm raised its price by about \$1 per foot of tree, with prices now sitting around \$15/ft. She said inflation drove the business to raise its prices after they were stable for the last few years.

Thibeault said he thinks prices may now be at a stable point.

"The good news is I think we have seen the last of the increase for a couple of years, and we should have a stabilized price for a couple of years on the market," he said.

— The Canadian Press

CURE FOR THOSE SICK OF SICK NOTES

Everyone wants a system that makes sense; everyone wants to reduce unnecessary pressure on health-care providers; everyone wants workplaces with common sense, not bureaucracy.

TORY MCNALLY
WORKING WORLD



FOR many Manitoba employers, sick notes for short-term absences have simply been part of the landscape. They were written into policies years ago, and became the standard way to verify an absence.

For a long time, few questioned the practice because it was familiar and felt like a reasonable safeguard. Most employers were not trying to make life difficult for workers or doctors; they were trying to manage attendance in a responsible way.

What has become clear recently, however, is this old approach has created a surprising amount of strain on the very system we rely on to keep people healthy.

Doctors Manitoba has shone a bright light on the impact of sick notes for short-term absences — and it has been eye-opening for many employers.

The advocate group's Sick of Sick Notes campaign revealed Manitoba doctors are writing more than 600,000 sick notes for short-term absences every year. That is the equivalent of 36,000 physician hours spent on paperwork instead of patients and comes with an \$8 million annual cost to taxpayers.

Most employers had no idea their policies were contributing to this. And every employer I have spoken to since Doctors Manitoba raised the issue has said the same thing. If sick notes for short-term absences are burdening the health-care system, then they are happy to change course. They just want to understand what effective alternatives look like.

The Manitoba government has now

stepped in with proposed legislation that will limit sick notes to absences of seven consecutive calendar days or more. This brings Manitoba in line with the rest of the country and reflects a much more practical approach.

Most short-term illnesses cannot be medically confirmed after the fact anyway. Doctors repeatedly say by the time someone feels well enough to get a note, symptoms are gone. In many cases, the physician has no method to verify what happened. A sick note becomes little more than a restatement of what the employee says.

Employers who hear this often feel a sense of relief. They were asking doctors to do something that sounded straightforward but was not actually useful. They were also asking employees to take time away from resting and recovering to sit in waiting rooms, often exposing others to whatever short-term illness they had.

Once the facts are laid out, it becomes obvious sick notes for short-term absences do not achieve what employers intended.

This is not a story about employers pushing for an unnecessary practice. It is a story about a longstanding tradition that remained in place because no one understood the full picture. For decades, sick notes for short-term absences felt like the only tool available to confirm an absence. That is no longer the case.

If anything, the conversation sparked by Doctors Manitoba has created an opportunity for employers to modernize attendance management in ways that support both business needs and employee well-being.

The question employers now ask is simple: if we are not using sick notes for short-term absences, what should we use instead?

The answer is equally simple: self-attestation.

Self-attestation is a process where employees confirm in writing they were unable to work due to illness. It can be done through a short form or email. It is already widely used in other provinces, in federally regulated workplaces and even in many private companies across Manitoba.

It offers exactly what employers were looking for in the first place: a documented record of the absence the employee affirms is true.

Attestation forms are quick, clear and easy to store in a personnel file. They also remove the need for an employee to seek medical paperwork for everyday illnesses.

Instead of creating additional traffic in clinics, they keep sick individuals who do not require medical attention at home where they belong. Employers I have worked with appreciate this approach is both responsible and practical. It respects employee privacy, reduces administrative burdens and still provides the consistency HR policies require.

However, some employers wonder whether this will lead to more misuse of sick time.

The reality is sick notes for short-term absences never prevented misuse in the first place. Someone who wants to take a day off dishonestly can often find a way, whether notes are required or not. What truly reduces misuse is a clear attendance management process, regular communication and early intervention when patterns emerge.

This new legislation does not remove any of those tools. It simply removes a document that was never particularly effective.

Employers can still monitor trends. They must still have return to work discussions. They can still address concerns through progressive discipline when needed. None of that changes.

What changes is the employee who is feverish or dealing with a stomach virus no longer needs to leave home to obtain proof for an absence a doctor cannot meaningfully verify anyway.

One of the most encouraging parts of this shift has been the level of employer support.

The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce has backed the change and many private and public employers have openly agreed with Doctors Manitoba. Once they saw the numbers, heard directly from physicians and realized the unintended consequences of sick notes for short-term absences,

most were eager to find a better way.

Employers care about community well-being. They care about the health of their employees, too. They also understand an overburdened health-care system affects everyone.

This is why the coming legislative change feels less like a disruption and more like a logical correction. It aligns Manitoba with national standards. It frees up thousands of hours for physicians who are badly needed for pressing patient care. It saves money that can be redirected to more meaningful health priorities. And it gives employers a chance to update outdated policies that were not delivering much value.

The shift to attestation forms is going to be easier than many expect. Most HR systems can integrate them with little effort.

Employees adjust quickly because the process is simpler and less stressful. Managers appreciate it removes the awkwardness of requiring medical documentation for routine illnesses. Organizations benefit from policies that feel both modern and empathetic.

This is a moment when employers, employees, physicians and government are aligned.

Everyone wants a system that makes sense; everyone wants to reduce unnecessary pressure on health-care providers; everyone wants workplaces that treat illness with common sense rather than bureaucracy.

With the government's upcoming legislation and the clear guidance from Doctors Manitoba, employers now have the clarity they need.

Self-attestation is the new way — and the transition is not just doable, it is genuinely better for everyone involved.

If Manitoba employers embrace this shift (as many already have), we will strengthen both our workplaces and our health-care system at the same time. It is the right move and it is long overdue.

Tory McNally, CPHR, BSc., vice-president, professional services at TIPI Legacy HR+ (formerly Legacy Bowes), is a human resource consultant, radio personality and problem solver. She can be reached at tmcnally@tipipartners.com