Health plan deductibles weigh down employees

By Tara Siegel Bernard, News York Times

Anita Maina was working on an arts and crafts project she found on Pinterest — creating a table out of wood and cork — when she ripped off a fingernail while removing staples from a piece of wood.

“It is one of those things that really hurt, and I thought I should go to urgent care,” said Maina, 27.

But she ultimately skipped the visit since she had not met the $6,000 deductible on her health plan, and she knew she probably did not have much left in her health savings account, a type of tax-advantaged savings vehicle that is often used with high-deductible plans to help defray out-of-pocket costs.

Maina, an associate in a health and human services consulting agency, said her employer added the high-deductible plan earlier this year; though her monthly premiums are only $34, these plans require employees to pay for a greater share of their medical expenses upfront, before the plan starts making payments.

Next year, even more corporate workers are likely to be offered high-deductible plans — sometimes known more benignly as consumer-directed plans — and at a rising share of large companies, it will be the only option remaining.

“You can’t sugarcoat this,” said Paul B. Ginsburg, a professor of the practice of health policy and management at USC’s Sol Price School of Public Policy. “This is a more challenging situation for consumers and it’s a reflection of how difficult it is to afford health care.”

Just as employers replaced pensions with retirement savings plans, more large companies appear to be in a similar cost-sharing shift with health plans. Besides making workers responsible for more of their care, employers hope these plans will motivate employees to comparison-shop for medical services – an admirable goal but one that some say is hard to achieve.

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