

# Big Step for MCA

## Entertainment Firm Extends Health Benefits to Same-Sex Partners

By THOMAS S. MULLIGAN  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

MCA Inc. on Friday became the first entertainment company to extend health insurance coverage to "committed, same-sex partners" of its employees, but some criticized the new policy as too limited.

Gay and lesbian rights proponents said the action by influential MCA, a unit of the Japanese industrial concern Matsushita, could spread through the entertainment industry. Indeed, Fox Inc. said it was "definitely considering" a similar policy.

Sid Sheinberg, MCA president and chief operating officer, said the new policy, effective July 1, was "motivated by feelings of essential fairness."

But because it limits coverage to employees with same-sex partners, some experts believe that the MCA policy itself is unfair.

"I'm not sure that this is progress," said Tom Coleman, a lawyer and executive director of the Family Diversity Project in Los Angeles. For an unmarried worker with a partner of the opposite sex, he said, "based on considerations of family status, you're going to be paid less per hour, bottom line."

MCA declined to say how many of its 16,000 U.S. employees would be affected by the policy or how much it would cost. A spokeswoman said that because of collective-bargaining issues, certain unionized workers will not immediately be eligible.

MCA followed in the steps of Lotus Development Corp. of Cambridge, Mass., and Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, both of which last year began providing health coverage for partners of their gay and lesbian employees.

Other companies, notably Levi Strauss & Co. of San Francisco and Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. of Waterbury, Vt., extend health benefits to partners of all employees, regardless of gender or marital status. Numerous municipal employers, Los Angeles and San Francisco among them, have taken similar action.

What all such policies have in common is that they require employees to meet certain criteria that demonstrate a long-term commitment to their partners.

In the case of MCA, employees will sign an "affidavit of marriage/spousal equivalency" in which they will declare, among other things, that they live with their partner and plan to do so indefinitely, that they are not married to someone else and that they share responsibility for basic living expenses.

The affidavit was based on a model drawn up by a group of benefits experts organized by Hollywood Supports, an entertainment industry group created last year to counter discrimination based on sexual orientation and fears about AIDS. Sheinberg and former Fox Chairman Barry Diller were among the founders.

Sheinberg seemed exasperated that people would find fault with the MCA initiative. "We obviously don't think it's discriminatory or we wouldn't have done it," he said.

"The real fairness issue is that gay and lesbian employees have experienced all kinds of discrimination and this is a step toward recognizing that," said Rich Jennings of Hollywood Supports. He, like others, noted that opposite-sex partners at least have the option of getting married, while gays and lesbians do not.

Sheinberg worried that other companies will seize on doubts about fairness or legality to justify not adopting policies of their own. "Believe me," he said, "if there's an excuse, you'll find people who'll leap to catch it."

Civil rights lawyer Gloria R. Allred on Friday applauded MCA for taking "a very important step on behalf of people who do not have the opportunity to have their long-term relationships recognized under the law."

However, Allred too had discrimination concerns. "Other couples also have serious commitments but have good reasons for not marrying," she said.

"Some companies—I'm not saying MCA—might choose this course strictly on economic grounds, saying, 'Well, we can't afford to do this for everybody,'" Allred said. "But that's no defense against a discrimination charge."

Los Angeles Times

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 1992

MARKETS/MONEY/PERSONAL FINANCE

# BUSINESS