

Public health is public wealth

Written by Deanna Herbert

As I was sitting in a waiting room last week, reading through a magazine, I came across a great article addressing our health care system. I apologize to the authors of the article as I haven't been able to reference it again, but it was entitled "The Best Medicine" and I found it in the Feb. 2010 edition of Body and Soul magazine.

The gist of the article, which had input from a number of prominent physicians, was that our health care system is really more of a disease treatment system; and a broken one at that. Nationally, 95 percent of U.S. health care dollars are spent on the treatment of disease while five percent, or less, is spent on prevention. Considering where the money is going, it is probably no coincidence that our rates of chronic disease are at an all time high.

Chronic diseases—arthritis, asthma, cancer, heart disease, diabetes—are the leading cause of death in the U.S. and nearly half of all Americans have at least one of them. They are associated with a significant portion of rising health care costs and impact all of us in some way, whether it's through our taxes, our insurance premiums, our own quality of life or that of a family member.

Pick up any article on the health of our nation and you'll see that our younger generation is in for some serious troubles ahead if things don't change. We are living in times of unprecedented increases in childhood obesity, which will in turn produce an even greater burden of chronic illness than what we live with today.

According to the 2008 Almanac of Chronic Disease, by 2015 it is estimated that 75 percent of Americans will be obese, significantly contributing to the rise in chronic illness.

Michael D. Parkinson, M.D., former president of the American College of Preventive Medicine, said the majority of chronic illnesses stem from our individual health behaviors, or lack thereof. The Almanac of Chronic Disease suggests Americans could eliminate at least 80 percent of type 2 diabetes, 30-60 percent of all cancers, and 80 percent of heart disease and stroke if Americans were to do three things: stop smoking, develop healthy eating habits and get in shape.

It doesn't matter whether or not you are one of the many Americans that believe more health care dollars should be spent on prevention rather than treatment if we all don't buy into the process and commitment of prevention it will never succeed. Talking about prevention is great, funding it even better, but implementing prevention on the individual level is not easy. In some

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cases it may seem harder than getting treatment.

Altering the course we're on will take change, but those changes don't require government policies. What they take is an active, informed interest and a desire to improve quality of life, not just for ourselves, but for our communities. Health is an investment one seldom regrets.