

A Prevention Movement—The Time is Now

In 1993, McGinnis and Foege (1) reoriented our understanding of the ‘actual’ causes of death in the United States, a perspective refreshed by Mokdad and colleagues in 2004 (2). The leading ‘causes’ of premature death, along with untold suffering, are not diseases such as heart disease and cancer—but the factors that cause the diseases that so often cause premature death. Those factors are dominated by a list of ten modifiable factors, which are in turn dominated by just three: tobacco use, dietary pattern, and physical activity.

Were we to apply what we know about lifestyle to the promotion of health and the prevention of disease, we could reduce heart disease rates by some 80%, diabetes by 90%, and cancer by between 30% and 60%, with similarly stunning advances across a range of other conditions. What stands in our way is not lack of knowledge—but a lack of both collective will, and universally accessible ways, to convert such knowledge into the power of action. The mandate to move in that direction is compelling, if not overwhelming. And to get that job done, movement is what we need: a prevention movement.

We talk about health care in the United States, but we really mean disease care—the care rendered by clinicians to those who are sick. Even when we speak of prevention, we generally mean clinical preventive services, such as cancer screening. Valuable as screening is, it does not prevent cancer outright, it finds it early. Finding cancer early is better than finding it late and underutilization of mammography and colonoscopy comes at a tragic cost in lives. But not getting cancer is better by far than finding it early, and lifestyle change offers the power of that very outcome.

Health care is not exclusively, and perhaps not even preferentially, the province of the health care provider. It must play out in schools and supermarkets, shopping malls and suburban neighborhoods, city centers and cinemas, worksites and restaurants, legislatures and living rooms. To realize the dramatic advances in the human condition the conversion of our current knowledge into powerful action would accord us—the addition of both years to life, and life to years—we must move from our narrow vision of health care to a prevention-oriented system that is truly about the cultivation of health, at its diverse sources. The time for that movement, a prevention movement, is now!

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- 1) McGinnis JM, Foege WH. Actual causes of death in the United States. *JAMA*. 1993 Nov 10;270(18):2207-12
- 2) Mokdad AH, Marks JS, Stroup DF, Gerberding JL. Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000. *JAMA*. 2004 Mar 10;291(10):1238-45