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Key Steps for a Healthy Nation

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As Americans, we are accustomed to thinking of our country as the best in many, if not most, endeavors. We take pride in being the wealthiest nation in the world and the most open of civil societies, with the best educational institutions and the greatest military might on the planet. We delight in exporting our culture: our music, films and fashions. However, when it comes to health, our dream is nowhere near realized. We fall far short.

Our biomedical research and technological capabilities are second to none. But we rank dismally low in most meaningful measurements of well being. For example, according to the most recent data, we ranked 31st among 195 nations in average life expectancy at birth and 29th in infant mortality.¹ We have a healthcare system rife with inefficiencies and built on perverse reimbursement incentives, influencing physicians to over-utilize expensive technologies and downplay powerful preventive strategies.

We also live in a social environment that often sabotages health. Tragically, our food industry, a relentless purveyor of cheap junk food, contributes hugely to the diseases we develop. One out of every three of our children is now considered overweight or obese. These children are increasingly at risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke and other chronic diseases at

The **Western Lifestyle** Associated with:

Lack of physical activity



High stress levels



Smoking



Unhealthy diet



- OBESITY**
- **1 out of 3** children and **2 out of 3** adults are considered overweight or obese.
- CHRONIC DISEASE**
- **7 out of 10** Americans who die each year, die from heart disease, stroke, diabetes or cancer.
- * **These diseases are among the most costly but most PREVENTABLE of all health problems.**

younger and younger ages. As Michael Pollan, journalist and healthy food advocate, bluntly puts it, “One of the leading products of the American food industry has become patients for the American healthcare industry.”² Experts now predict that, if these trends go unchecked, our children’s lifespan will be shorter than our own.

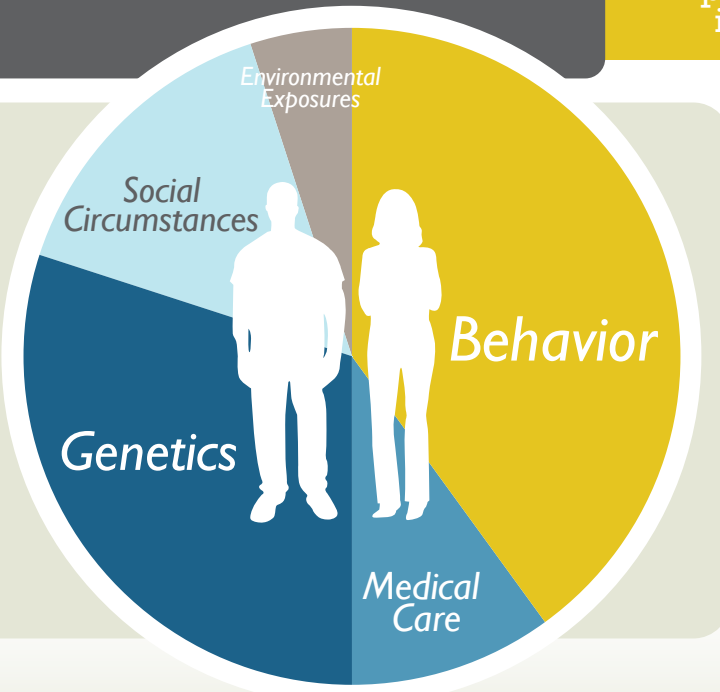
In addition, the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, with disease and early death taking an unfair toll on the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. All this in the wealthiest nation in the world. We need a dream of a truly healthy nation.

Disease and Premature Death in America

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC), seven of every ten Americans who die each year—that’s more than 1.7 million people—die from a chronic disease such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes or cancer.³ What’s more, says the CDC, three-quarters of our healthcare dollar goes to treat these chronic diseases, which are among the most costly but most preventable of all health problems. *To reiterate, much of this disease is preventable.* All of these killer diseases have been linked to our Western lifestyle—characterized by a lack of physical activity, high stress levels, smoking and a diet of highly processed foods loaded with sugar and saturated fats.



Of these factors, **BEHAVIOR** has the biggest impact on health and well being (or, behavior is the major contributor to an early death).



Premature deaths in the US:

- 40%** due to personal behavioral patterns
- 10%** due to a lack of medical care
- 30%** due to genetic influences
- 15%** due to social circumstances
- 5%** due to environmental exposures

Data comes from S.A. Schroeder, "We Can Do Better: Improving the Health of the American People," New England Journal of Medicine, 2007 adapted from J. Michael McGinnis, et al., "The Case For More Active Policy Attention To Health Promotion," 2002, Health Affairs, 21, no.2, p. 83.

Today, two out of every three American adults are overweight. A 2004 study estimated that almost 30 percent of the increase in healthcare spending from 1987 to 2001 was due to the rise in obesity.⁴ Amazingly, in 1980, obesity wasn't even on the list of sources of health spending growth. Now, the medical consequences of obesity account for almost ten cents of every dollar spent on healthcare.⁵ And because we're seeing a rise of obesity in our children, we can only expect the chronic diseases that are linked to diet and obesity to continue to soar, along with their costs—both in terms of human suffering and in real dollars. The bottom line: Americans are getting sicker, and we're spending more on expensive treatments that aren't the best approach.

The Real Determinants of Our Health

What supports health? Our health is influenced by five major factors: our personal behaviors, our genes,

our social circumstances, our access to good medical care and our environmental exposures. Of these factors, behavior has the biggest impact on health and well-being, or conversely, behavior is the major contributor to an early death. Today, behavioral patterns account for about 40 percent of all premature deaths in the US. Thus, changing our behavior presents the greatest opportunity to reduce chronic disease and prevent an early demise.⁶ Medical care, or more accurately the lack of it, plays a surprisingly small part, contributing only about 10 percent to premature deaths in the US. The remaining half of premature deaths is due to genetic influences (30 percent), social circumstances (15 percent) and environmental exposures (5 percent). Thus, the biggest bang for our buck—both literally and figuratively—comes from the lifestyle choices we make every day.

If you look beyond the chronic diseases that now stalk us to the root causes of those diseases, you'll find just three behaviors that cause the greatest harm: smoking, poor diet and lack of physical exercise. The findings of a more recent study reinforce what we already know about the power of healthy behaviors. Among the 23,000 men and women

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who participated, those who practiced four healthy habits—eating well, being physically active, not smoking and keeping a healthy weight—slashed their risk of diabetes by 93 percent, heart attack by 81 percent, stroke by 50 percent and cancer of all types by 36 percent! Practicing just one of the four healthy behaviors cut the risk of developing a chronic disease fully *in half*.⁷

The Need for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

But we all know that following a healthy lifestyle is easier said than done. Knowledge is not necessarily power. For years, experts have been urging Americans to quit smoking, eat well and get moving. And while we've made some progress on giving up cigarettes,

smoking remains the leading preventable cause of death worldwide. Embracing a healthy lifestyle continues to be elusive for the vast majority of us. Why? Change is difficult, to be sure. But we also live in a society where it's very difficult to make healthy choices: nicotine is an addictive drug, and as the former FDA commissioner David Kessler has recently documented, the food industry is tireless in its efforts to make its products virtually addictive as well. It is as if each of us is a salmon swimming alone, struggling against a never-ending toxic tide.

We need a much greater focus not only on helping individuals engage in healthy behaviors, but also on creating social and physical environments that promote good health. This two-pronged effort must occur simultaneously, because, according to Healthy People 2010, "the

The Power of Healthy Behaviors

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- 2 Being physically active**
- 3 Not smoking**
- 4 Keeping a healthy weight**



Advancing the Nation's Perspective on Health and Healing

According to Oprah, Dr. Mehmet Oz is “America’s doctor.” With his own show, Dr. Oz is perhaps the nation’s biggest celebrity doctor but he is also quite influential in encouraging the public to adopt healthier lifestyles. *Time* magazine ranked Oz 44th on its list of the 100 Most Influential People in 2008 and *Esquire* magazine placed him on its list of the 75 Most Influential People of the 21st century.

A proponent of integrative health—the practice of combining alternative therapies with conventional medicine—Dr. Oz addresses topics such as anti-aging, cancer prevention, diabetes, fitness, weight loss and other healthy living topics through his television show and his bestselling medical books.

Dr. Oz is not just a television doctor. He is pioneering new ways of thinking about medical care. In treating patients, Dr. Oz doesn’t shy away from recommending unconventional therapies such as acupuncture, yoga, hypnosis, music, massage, reflexology, aromatherapy and energy healing. He encourages people to be proactive and experts of their own health and healing.

Dr Oz’s Favorite Healthy Foods:¹

- ✓ Almonds
- ✓ Eggs
- ✓ Low-fat Greek Yogurt
- ✓ Dark Chocolate
- ✓ Broccoli
- ✓ Oatmeal
- ✓ Fresh Fruit

“As a child I wanted to be either a pro athlete or a heart surgeon. I failed at the former, so I pursued the latter. In reality, they are scarily similar professions. You have to deliver the goods every day. And no one cares how well you performed yesterday.”²



Photo courtesy David Berkowitz

Stay vital and engaged. If you do not have an important reason to stay healthy, then you will get sick.³



from the editor

health of the individual is almost inseparable from the health of the larger community.”⁸ Over the last several decades, we have accumulated irrefutable evidence that underscores the power of public health measures, yet there’s been a failure to adequately invest in such transformative initiatives.

To be sure, excellent medical care and disease management must remain top priorities, but we need to spend more on prevention and wellness strategies

to save lives and cut costs. For example, we urgently need to reform major aspects of the food industry, including agricultural subsidies and food prices. If we don’t address the American way of eating, it will be impossible to prevent the diseases that are major killers of Americans. We also need to address our ever-increasing toxic environment, as we learn more and more about the enormous toll that toxic chemicals are taking on our health.

The major challenge will be to bring about the large-scale societal changes necessary to fix the environment that so flagrantly fosters obesity and inactivity and so readily contributes to disease.

Preventive measures alone won’t guarantee healthy lives for everyone, but they would be a giant step toward slowing disease and/or catching it early, rather than making it more profitable to prescribe a drug or send a patient to surgery after disease has taken hold.

Looking Toward the Future

While there are barriers to investing in public health initiatives and preventive health strategies, there are reasons to be optimistic. Change is happening apace. First, individuals are seeking assistance in making healthy lifestyle choices. And employers are stepping up to the plate to help: they continue to institute workplace wellness programs, which are increasingly showing a positive return on investment. Helping employees adopt healthier behaviors is paying off in a number of ways: less sickness and absenteeism, lower healthcare costs and ultimately an increased bottom line.

We also need to create healthier communities that provide better options at every turn, whether it’s more nutritious foods in the school cafeteria, neighborhood delis or local restaurants; more sidewalks and parks in our neighborhoods; or more creative local ordinances, such as those that extend smokefree spaces or mandate caloric information on all food items. Pilot projects in schools and communities across the country are showing that changing the environment does make it easier for people to make good choices and avoid bad ones.

Second, physicians, along with other healthcare providers and medical institutions, are beginning to embrace lessons from the field of prevention. For example, since

the widespread coverage of the Institute of Medicine’s 2006 report, *Preventing Medicine Errors*, which found that medication errors alone injure 1.5 million people and cost billions of dollars annually in the US, a series of actions throughout the healthcare arena is being taken to prevent these injuries, extending from the use of electronic prescriptions and drug-interaction software programs to improvements in labeling and packaging of medicines.⁹

Third, the Patient Protection and Affordable Health Care Act of 2010 is a major step forward in embracing health promotion and disease prevention. The Act advances a wide array of new initiatives and funding, including coverage of numerous preventive services with no out-of-pocket cost to the individual; Medicare coverage of an annual wellness visit that includes preventive care; the establishment of a Prevention and Public Health Fund to the tune of up to \$2 billion dollars by 2015; and a new national prevention, health promotion and public health council to address future activities.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we need to press for even more healthcare reform if we are to realize our dream.

We are moving in the right direction; however, much remains to be done. The major challenge will be to bring about the large-scale societal changes necessary to fix the environment that so flagrantly fosters obesity and inactivity and so readily contributes to disease. This will take bold legislation, industry regulation and targeted taxes, among other determined actions. Resistance will be fierce. Much is at stake. But the dream of a healthy nation is clearly within our grasp.

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