

The Heart of Public Health: Prevention



Lynn Goldman

Michael and Lori Milken Dean of Public Health
Milken Institute School of Public Health,
 George Washington University

Great strides have been made in recent decades, but so much remains to be done. Imagine the benefits of curbing pollution, obesity, hypertension and smoking.

It's been more than 50 years since the first surgeon general's report came out warning Americans about the dangers of tobacco, and more than 40 years since we passed the Clean Air Act. Since that time, the United States has made tremendous progress in the fight to clean up the air and reduce the threat posed by tobacco.

Americans no longer view smoking as glamorous, and smoking rates have plummeted by more than half. At the same time, the Clean Air Act has reduced harmful particulates, lead and ozone in the air.

We know public health programs save lives and prevent serious diseases. In just the first 20 years after the Clean Air Act was signed,

the law helped prevent 205,000 premature deaths from heart disease, asthma and other ailments caused by breathing in polluted air. And we know that 20th century tobacco-control programs prevented more than 795,000 deaths from lung cancer alone. Together, this is 1 million fewer deaths.

Despite the progress made on a number of fronts, we still have a long way to go to protect people from harmful pollutants and toxic chemicals, especially air pollution in developing countries. And the fight against tobacco is far from over: The World Health Organization notes that tobacco-related diseases still kill 6 million people every year.

Meanwhile, obesity is a rising threat.

A 2012 report warned that if the United States does nothing to combat the condition, more than half of all Americans will suffer from it by 2030. There is some good news: We have started to turn the corner on obesity rates in children under the age of 5. Much more will need to be done if we are to bring this epidemic under control.

In the United States, we spend just 3 percent of our health-care dollars on prevention and just a small fraction on research. Yet 75 percent of all our health-care spending goes toward treating preventable diseases. It's time to shift our priorities to prevention and research programs aimed at keeping people healthy.

What can we do?

Exposure to pollution in the air we breathe can cause asthma and other serious conditions. The Obama administration has proposed rules that would cut carbon pollution from electrical power generators by 30 percent. That plan, if adopted, would not only save on health-care costs but prevent about 150,000 asthma attacks and 3,700 bronchitis cases by 2030. Other countries should take similar steps.

Second, obesity is on the rise in nearly every country in the world, as is Type 2 diabetes. Increasingly, consumers have access to fast foods loaded with hidden calories, and many people are inactive. We all have a role to play in reducing this problem, but government policies that educate consumers on calorie counts and provide physical education in schools (for example) help people make the right decisions.

Third is the problem of uncontrolled hypertension, a risk factor for many

“ Investing in public health produces a healthy return — and one that could leave a beneficial legacy not just for this generation but for generations to come. ”

cardiovascular diseases. Obesity plays a role, but there are other important factors, such as physical inactivity and salt consumption. Hypertension is relatively easy to identify and treat. However, efforts to control hypertension globally are woefully underfunded.

Finally, we need more efforts to curb the use of tobacco. In the United States, a recent IOM report concluded that raising the minimum age to buy tobacco products would delay smoking initiation, which in turn would save lives. Countries around the world need to deploy strategies known to prevent tobacco use, such as banning tobacco ads and smoking in public places.

In the United States alone, an investment of just \$10 per person per year in prevention programs would save more than \$16 billion annually within five years. This is if we apply just what we already know; more research would identify additional opportunities to promote health and save money. Investing in public health produces a healthy return — and one that could leave a beneficial legacy not just for this generation but for generations to come.

CLEAN AIR ACT

205,000

premature deaths prevented from heart disease, asthma and other ailments caused by breathing in polluted air

TOBACCO-CONTROL PROGRAMS

795,000

lung cancer deaths prevented

\$10/ 

\$10 per person per year invested in prevention programs would save more than \$16 billion annually within five years