

Surgeon General's Perspectives

AN IMPORTANT TIME FOR PREVENTION

In my 23 years as a family physician on the Gulf Coast, I saw a lot of missed opportunities for prevention. Today, as “America’s Doctor,” I believe that if we want to truly reform health care in this country, we need to stop people from getting sick in the first place, and prevent illness and disease before it starts.

Americans currently do not receive the level of preventive services they need; in fact, some estimates suggest that such services are used at only about half the recommended rate.¹ If just five high-value preventive services (e.g., colorectal screening, breast cancer screening, influenza vaccines, counseling on smoking cessation, and regular aspirin use) were used 90% of the time, more than 100,000 deaths could be averted each year.²

At the same time, we need to change the way we think about health in this country. We want to maintain our state-of-the-art medicine while recognizing that staying healthy depends upon other factors that influence our health; for example, the circumstances and environments in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and grow old. Since 1900, it is estimated that only 10% to 15% of increased longevity in wealthy industrialized nations is due to improved health care.³ A far greater percentage of this gain is attributable to social determinants, such as housing, education, transportation, the workplace, the environment, and the availability of quality, affordable food.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (hereafter, the Affordable Care Act) provides an historic funding commitment to promote prevention and wellness.⁴ It extends health insurance to millions of people, eliminates copayments and deductibles for preventive services, and invests heavily in prevention and wellness in the community and workplace.

In addition, the Affordable Care Act creates a new National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council (hereafter, the Council), which I am honored to chair. The Council comprises senior-level and cabinet-rank officials from 17 federal departments, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Agriculture, Department of Education, Department of Transportation, Department of Justice, Department of Defense, Department of Labor, Department of Homeland Security, Depart-



VADM Regina M. Benjamin,
Surgeon General

ment of Veterans Affairs, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Federal Trade Commission, Environmental Protection Agency, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Domestic Policy Council, Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Management and Budget, and the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs.

The Council will provide coordination and leadership at the federal level to ensure the government is focused on prevention, and has been charged with developing a first-ever National Prevention Strategy by March 2011. This strategy will establish actions within and across federal departments and agencies relating to prevention, health promotion, and public health. These actions will be grounded in science-based prevention recommendations and guidelines. The value of the National Prevention Strategy will be determined, in part, by its ability to generate, align, and focus collaboration among governmental and nongovernmental partners in the development and implementation of prevention and wellness initiatives and programs.

By law, the Council is required to address smoking cessation, proper nutrition, appropriate exercise, mental health, behavioral health, substance use disorder, and domestic violence screenings. In addition, the law says these activities should align with the government’s *Healthy People* initiative, which sets health targets for Americans for the next decade.⁵ The Council is

required to issue an annual report to the relevant committees in Congress and the President on the progress of its prevention efforts. The first report was submitted July 1, 2010.⁶

The Affordable Care Act also creates an Advisory Group on Prevention, Health Promotion, and Integrative and Public Health, which will comprise up to 25 nonfederal experts who will offer advice.

We have a real opportunity to move the nation from a “sick care” system to one that is based on wellness and prevention. As we usher in a new year, let’s resolve to work together to make prevention a priority.

For more information on prevention activities, visit <http://www.healthcare.gov/center/councils/nphpphc/index.html>.



Regina M. Benjamin, MD, MBA
VADM, USPHS
Surgeon General

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