

POLITICO

The promise of prevention

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Some of the health care reform law's most far-reaching effects got little attention during the stormy debate. But its programs for prevention and early detection of chronic disease could transform our health system.

This new law could turn the current "sick care" system, which focuses on treating those who are ill, into one that does a far better job of keeping people healthy.

For example, if all Americans took scientifically recommended action to prevent heart disease, our organizations found in a 2008 study, the number of heart attacks would be cut by two-thirds, the number of strokes would fall by one-third and every adult's life expectancy would increase by 1.3 years.

Other evidence points to the enormous promise of prevention. Consider that 60 percent of annual U.S. cancer deaths could be prevented if all Americans were to stop smoking, get screened for cancer, eat healthful food and exercise regularly.

With moderate weight loss, individuals with pre-diabetes can reduce their risk of developing diabetes by 58 percent. And reversing America's growing obesity epidemic could significantly reduce the incidence of life-threatening chronic disease.

Scientific research has yielded a treasure-trove of tools for preventing life-threatening diseases like cancer, heart disease and diabetes. But far too few Americans benefit from access to screening tests, information about leading an active lifestyle or counseling on adopting healthy behaviors.

Recent studies have shown that only half the recommended populations are screened for colorectal cancer, and only one-third of high blood pressure cases are controlled. In fact, one-quarter of the nearly 24 million Americans with diabetes do not even know they have it.

The new health care law could transform the role of prevention by taking unprecedented national approaches to avert chronic disease or detect it early.

It establishes a new panel — the National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council — that could integrate the prevention efforts of numerous federal government agencies and coordinate all prevention and wellness services nationwide.

This council is to issue a national strategy within a year to help shape a new systemwide approach for prevention and wellness.

In addition, the new Prevention and Public Health Fund is the largest down payment on

prevention and wellness in U.S. history. It aims to invest \$500 million during this fiscal year. Eventually, \$2 billion will be invested annually to expand access to prevention services, as well as for prevention research and education campaigns.

There is also support for community-based programs that promote disease prevention and control at the local level — like the National Diabetes Prevention Program. This supports community-based intervention programs, aimed at preventing development of type 2 diabetes in those diagnosed with pre-diabetes.

The new law makes many preventive services affordable, because it requires new health plans to cover them beginning in September — with no deductibles or co-payments.

Providers get incentives to focus on prevention and chronic care. Consumers will also be able to make healthy diet choices — using the new menu-labeling requirements for nutritional content of all food in chain restaurants.

The law also seeks to strengthen the preventive service program for seniors. Beginning in 2011, Medicare will have to cover an annual wellness visit with a health care professional and also a personalized prevention plan.

This annual health assessment will help seniors, people with disabilities and others in Medicare to understand their level of risk for chronic disease, determine appropriate steps for a healthier lifestyle and receive recommended tests and services that help prevent disease or detect it early.

The health care law also eliminates the co-pays that Medicare charges patients for certain preventive services and could eventually include all essential screening tests. It offers incentives to Medicaid beneficiaries who successfully participate in programs that promote healthy lifestyles.

The promise of prevention can be fulfilled only if the new law is implemented effectively and funds are allocated expediently.

If our nation succeeds in fixing its broken health care system, we can save lives while building a healthier and more productive population.

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