

# How To Make Nation, Health Care System Healthier?

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Source: Advance Publications, Inc.

Dr. Regina Benjamin is absolutely right. So how to go about filling her prescription for health care reform?

"If we really want to reform our health care in our country, we need to prevent people from getting sick in the first place," the Mobile-native U.S. surgeon general told the Alabama Legislature Thursday.

That is reform people of all political stripes can get behind. We all know we are spending far too much for health care, and despite all that spending, we are not a healthy nation. We also know that a lot of the cost and a lot of the misery come from health conditions that can be prevented. We can save money and save suffering by making the population healthier, but how do we get there from here?

Two keys to preventive health care are early detection and lifestyle choices. Neither is as simple and straightforward as it seems.

Early detection can be a lifesaver for an individual, but it is not always clear that it saves the system money. In some areas, such as prenatal care, money spent early clearly saves cost later. In other cases, the cost of screening large numbers of people to find the few who are affected far outweighs the savings from early intervention in those cases. That does not mean we should not do it; it just means early detection does not always cut health care costs.

Lifestyle choices are even more complex. Dr. Max Michael, dean of UAB's school of public health, points out that 40 percent of premature deaths are related to lifestyle. But reducing those deaths is not as easy as just telling people to quit smoking or lose weight.

"It's easy to point to the person, to blame the victim," Michael said. "We need to create the platform that allows people to have healthy lives."

How do we prompt a person to get more exercise if she lives in a neighborhood where it is not safe to walk and she cannot afford to go to a gym? How does she find time to exercise when she works two jobs and cares for her ailing mother, along with her own children?

How do we encourage a person to eat healthier foods if there is not a real grocery store in his neighborhood, only fast-food outlets, and he does not know how to cook?

How do we attack the deadliest lifestyle choice of all, tobacco, when so much more money is being spent to encourage smoking than to discourage it?

Promoting good health is an issue that reaches far beyond the health care system. It is an economic issue, a neighborhood infrastructure issue, an environmental issue and an educational issue.

"I really want to change the way we think about health in this country," Benjamin said. "We really want to get to where everyone understands, where almost everything we do, even though it is not labeled health prevention, really does affect the quality and length of life of all Americans."

That broader understanding may help us find answers to the difficult questions about how to make our nation healthier and our health care system more affordable.

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