

Web Essay: The real causes of an unhealthy America

Why is it, as America is faced with exploding health costs and political battles over the best way to handle it, so much of the discussion is about delivery of health care and not all the other factors that play larger roles?



The physicians, hospitals, and clinics that take care of us when we're injured or ill definitely play an important part in our health. But you may be surprised to learn that experts – including those very health care professionals – point out that clinical care itself impacts only about 20 percent of an individual's and community's health. (Source: 2012 University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute)

Personally, it was only a few years ago that I recognized that the majority of my interactions with health care practitioners were caused by my own actions. My eating and exercise habits – and my love of fast motorcycles – were the direct cause of most of my visits to my doctor. So it was no surprise to me to learn that approximately a third of a person's health status is dictated by personal behaviors.

Of course, all of us understand this intellectually. Tobacco use, diet, lack of exercise, and other risky behaviors make us sicker. But in practice, we too often turn to our physicians with the expectation that a pill or medical procedure will take care of the problem – when the better solution would be for us to accept more personal responsibility for keeping healthy.

However, even taking into account our bad habits, the biggest influences on a person's health status are social and economic factors, and our physical environment – the locations where we live and work. Approximately half of the impact on our health is directly correlated to these factors. So low income, low education levels, unemployment or jobs in unhealthy environments, a lack of social or family network, unsafe communities, and the integrity and safety of our homes take the largest toll on our health. Those facing these challenges face a dramatic uphill battle – even before accounting for unhealthy behaviors.

As a community and as a country, if we are truly interested in reducing health care costs and increasing quality of life, we need to pay much more attention to the social, economic and physical factors of health. And that's not only the job of health care professionals.

It is up to us as individuals to make responsible choices about our own behavior. It is also up to policymakers to recognize the impact that decisions about the economy, housing and other social issues have on people's health. Hopefully, both individuals and policymakers are up to the challenge.

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