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Nutrition for Health



THE DOLLAR POWER OF DISEASE PREVENTION

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Everyone remembers the battle over healthcare reform legislation – a struggle that continues today. While all of us may not agree on the specifics of each component of the plan, we do share the conviction that something *must* be done to decrease healthcare costs at every stage of life.

In a 2009 report, the Kaiser Family Foundation observed that because healthcare grows faster than many other sectors of the economy, its share of economic activity has increased over time. In 1970, total healthcare spending was about \$75 billion, or only about \$356 per person. In less than 40 years, these costs have grown to \$2.2 trillion, or \$7,421 per person. As a result, the share of economic activity devoted to healthcare grew from 7.2% in 1970 to 16.2% percent in 2007. By the year 2018, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services projects that health spending will be nearly one-fifth of GDP (20.3 %). Clearly, if we don't act now, costs will continue to spiral out of control.

Overweight and obesity, for example, affect one-third of all children and conditions related to overweight/obesity cost families and our country dearly. According to the Children's Defense Fund:

- Annual medical costs for a child diagnosed with obesity are on average three times higher than those for a child who is not overweight or obese.
- Nationwide, it is estimated that annual costs for prescription drugs, emergency room treatment and outpatient services related to childhood obesity total more than \$14 billion, with an additional \$238 million in inpatient hospital costs.
- If the childhood obesity trend continues, experts predict it could cut two to five years off the lifespan of the average child in America – making this the first generation to have a shorter life expectancy than its parents

The good news is that obesity can be prevented and that disease prevention is poised to assume greater urgency with the June 2011 release of The Public Health Institute's National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy. This blueprint for realigning the nation's healthcare system details the role that all sectors must play in containing costs and reducing disease.

Schools are a critical part of the strategy – certainly in the effort to prevent overweight and obesity. Many communities already have good health promotion programs in place, but now we must unite behind a master plan. Granted, it can be challenging to change our mindset from disease treatment to disease prevention, but it's the only way we can reverse trends that are undermining our country's well-being – including health, economics and even national security.

Schools are well positioned for long-term success in this effort. For starters, read the National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy. Use a wide net to identify and connect with all the health-related programs in your community. Focus on areas where school administrators and teachers can have an impact – for example, programs that target smoking, drugs, teen pregnancy, domestic violence and bullying. And be sure to put healthy eating and physical activity at the top of the list.

Dr. Finn is CEO of The American Council for Fitness and Nutrition, which is dedicated to teaching children the important concept of energy balance. In teaching lifelong wellness habits children must learn that what they eat and what they do must be in balance.

References

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