

Ten years ago, the science of aging was focused on increasing life spans. But long life without good health is not very valuable. I would venture a guess that most of us would advocate for shifting our emphasis away from increasing life span to increasing health span. Just increasing life span puts an inevitable squeeze on the health care system. The squeeze comes from the positive gains in life expectancy on one side and unsustainable medical costs on the other.

Our health care costs are substantially more per capita than the next most expensive health care system, Norway. And what do we get for this lavish outpouring of an estimated three trillion dollars a year? In rankings by the Commonwealth Fund of 11 western countries, the US ranked last in quality and health outcomes. And over the past fifteen years, preventable hospital deaths in the US due to medical errors in treatment quadrupled from an estimated 110,000 to 440,000.

At present, the most effective way to reduce health care costs is by reducing the rate of illness. On the other hand, we could solve our health care costs by decreasing life expectancy but I doubt that many of us would vote for that option so let's stick to reducing the rate of illness. Fortunately, we have a mechanism in place to do this — preventive medicine - which has been a medical specialty for over 60 years but represents less than 1% of the physician workforce. Follow the money and you'll quickly grasp why prevention isn't a major focus in our medical schools.

One-half of adult Americans have at least one chronic disease, and the majority of these are preventable or lessened by the adoption of healthy lifestyles: physical activity, good nutrition a healthy weight, and the avoidance of tobacco. The adoption of these lifestyle factors alone is associated with a 93 percent reduced risk of diabetes, 81 percent reduced risk of heart attack, 50 percent reduced risk of stroke and 36 percent reduced risk of cancer. Unfortunately, the acquisition of a positive lifestyle isn't as simple as 'Just Say No', as we have learned the hard way, but requires a concerted prevention and public health approach.

We all need to accept and build a future where prevention becomes the dominant force. Waiting to get sick before going to the doctor makes no economic sense. We need a proactive and prepared health care system to work with health-literate, motivated individuals to attain the widespread adoption of evidence-based preventive measures. Nutrition, physical activity and stress reduction should be the backbone of a truly integrative, prevention-focused health care system. Without it, health care costs will continue to climb, while, paradoxically, the health of the nation suffers.