Commentaries

The Answer is Prevention

EDUARDO SANCHEZ, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.A.F.P.
Chairman
Partnership for Prevention

Partnering for Prevention is pleased to support the United Health Foundation as it releases the 2012 Edition of America’s Health Rankings®. By highlighting health and the many factors that affect it, the rankings recognize healthy states, identify opportunities for improvement, and provide information that states, communities, and individuals can use in their efforts to improve health.

The Rankings also highlight the importance of prevention.

To rank states, America’s Health Rankings® assigns a composite score to states that accounts for health behaviors, community and environmental factors, health policies, clinical care, and health outcomes. Prevention is at the heart of each of these areas.

Specific measures of health behavior include: smoking, obesity, binge drinking, and sedentary lifestyle. Community and environmental measures include: violent crime, occupational fatalities, infectious disease, children in poverty, and air pollution. Health policy and clinical care measures include: lack of health insurance, public health funding, immunization coverage, early prenatal care, primary care physicians, and preventable hospitalizations. And finally, health outcome measures include: poor mental health days, poor physical health days, geographic disparity, infant mortality, cardiovascular deaths, cancer deaths, premature deaths, and diabetes.

The whole list shouts, “Prevention! Prevention! Prevention!”

And that’s good news because prevention is generally better than treatment, and there exists a plethora of evidence-based preventive measures that positively influence health determinants and health outcomes. A few examples include: increasing screening and counseling in physician offices to reduce smoking, building more parks and playgrounds to promote physical activity, and using disease management to improve diabetes care.

The possibilities are nearly endless, and the timing couldn’t be better. If, as a nation, we hope to achieve better quality health services, better health, and lower costs, it is imperative that we embrace health promotion and disease prevention policies and programs as key strategies and tactics.

Health insurance coverage is made more accessible under the Patient Protection Affordable Care Act, funding is made available for communities through the Prevention and Public Health Fund, and technical resources are growing to help decisionmakers choose clinical and community preventive services that are known to work and make sense for patients and communities.

Partnership for Prevention’s National Commission on Prevention Priorities (NCPP) has ranked recommended clinical preventive services based on their health impact and cost effectiveness and is developing a decision support tool for community preventive services. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services have recommended clinical services and community activities based on evidence of effectiveness. A new online database (What Works for Health), launched by the County Health Rankings project, catalogs policies and programs that communities can implement. And public health accreditation is becoming a reality that will assure quality and help health departments target limited resources for improving health.

America’s Health Rankings® helps states see where they stand, both in terms of overall health and in specific areas such as smoking, obesity, and diabetes. There’s great potential for states and communities to improve health, especially if they focus on prevention.