



## **ACPM Principles on Preventive Medicine and Health Reform**

### **Four Truths About Prevention**

As the debate over how to reform our nation's health care system rages on, there has been growing media attention focused on the role of prevention and wellness, with some questioning the benefits of preventive medicine and prevention-centered policy based on cost alone. To help illuminate the discussions around prevention, the American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM) presents this statement outlining four fundamental principles that lie at the foundation of preventive medicine. These principles promote the value of preventive medicine and are offered to increase the awareness, availability and utilization of clinical and community-based preventive services.

Among the claims made about preventive medicine is the assertion that widespread screening programs, with their subsequent follow-ups for false positives and complications, are much more expensive than what it would cost to treat the few real positive cases that would result if we just let people get sick. The facts reveal, however, that the admitted high costs of screening are directly related to the indiscriminate use of these tests. This is why prevention guidelines universally recommend targeted screening programs for at risk individuals rather than widespread use.

ACPM has worked to encourage Congress and the Administration to include in health care reform legislation incentives for healthy lifestyle behaviors and adequate coverage for evidence-based prevention and wellness programs and clinical and community-based preventive services. The ability to realize success in the implementation of these policies will hinge on our ability to shift the attention from cost alone, and concentrate on four fundamental principles that are at the foundation of preventive medicine:

1. **Preventive medicine is the humane choice.** It is unquestionably better for individuals to be healthy than it is for them to be sick. While large components of individual health may be outside of anyone's control, healthy lifestyle choices and preventive medicine services consistently elicit forces that push individuals toward the healthy end of the health continuum, and away from illness, disability and death.
2. **Preventive medicine encourages healthy lifestyles.** Much of the work of preventive medicine is educational and extra-clinical. The major causes of death and increased health care costs in this country are related to individual behaviors. Promoting good health and avoiding disease involves being physically active, eating a wholesome diet, managing one's weight, not smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation, driving safely, managing stress, getting adequate sleep, and being appropriately immunized. This is the true meaning of primary prevention, and the acquisition of these behaviors requires education and reinforcement, but very little time spent in a clinical setting.

3. **Preventive medicine maintains health.** As Dr. Ernst Wynder allegedly said, “It should be the function of medicine to help people die young as late in life as possible.” Clinical and community preventive medical services play fundamental roles in maintaining health across the entire life span. Furthermore, preventive medicine works to maintain health across the full spectrum of disease starting with primary prevention to promote health, secondary prevention to detect and treat disease early, and tertiary prevention to properly manage disease and prevent unnecessary complications.
4. **Preventive medicine is indeed cost-effective.** The reality is that not all preventive services save money, and preventive medicine cannot single-handedly save the American health care system. Instead of trying to justify preventive medical services by their ability to lower overall health care costs, they *must* be evaluated by whether or not they provide high value for their cost (i.e., are they cost-effective when analyzed by their cost per quality-adjusted life year (QALY)). While evidence has shown that some clinical preventive services, including childhood immunizations, smoking cessation and aspirin use by patients at risk for cardiovascular disease, do indeed offer net savings, no other medical treatments are unilaterally judged to have “worked” only if they save dollars. The value of all medical services, preventive and otherwise, should be determined by how much they improve the health of the public for a given cost. When held to this standard, most preventive services, including both clinical and community preventive interventions rank very well.

Today there is a growing body of research that indicates a positive return on investment among employers who offer prevention and wellness services to their employees. A study by the National Association of Manufacturers, *How Employers Use Incentives to Keep Employees Happy*, found that the “percentage of companies successfully measuring return on investment for health and wellness programs has sharply increased over the years, from 14 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in 2009. Some 83 percent of those who have measures say the programs return better than 1:1 on their investment. Studies done by Dee Edington at the University of Michigan’s Health Management Research Center and Ron Goetzel at Emory University’s Institute for Health and Productivity Studies have consistently shown that health behaviors save corporate dollars. Both scholars have found that healthy employees lead to productivity gains while reducing costs associated with absenteeism, worker compensation, and staff turnover.

Finally, the general public values preventive medicine and continues to strongly support such policies. Earlier this year, a national survey funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Trust for America’s Health revealed that 76% of American voters believe the level of funding for prevention should be increased. This wasn’t just because they thought it would save money. An overwhelming 72% agreed that “investing in prevention is worth it even if it doesn’t save money, because it will prevent disease and save lives.”

###

ACPM is the national medical specialty society representing physicians committed to health promotion and disease prevention. Founded in 1954, ACPM provides leadership in research, professional education, development of public policy, and enhancement of standards of preventive medicine. In addition to physicians Board-certified in preventive medicine, ACPM’s members include physicians Board-certified in other medical specialties who have a strong interest in health promotion and disease prevention. For more information visit [www.acpm.org](http://www.acpm.org).