

Health starts where we live, learn, work and play

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America leads the world in medical research and medical care, and for all we spend on health care, we should be the healthiest people on earth. We're not.

In fact, on some of the most important health indicators, like how long we live, we're not even in the top 25, behind countries like Bosnia and Jordan.

Research presented last week by scientists at the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association highlights the fact that the conditions in which we live and work have an important impact on our health, long before we become ill or ever see a doctor.

It's time for our nation to lead again on health, and that means taking three steps. The first is to ensure that everyone can afford to see a doctor when they're sick. Recent health insurance reforms represent an important move in that direction, yet a good deal of work on affordability and access remains.

The second is to build preventive care, like screening for cancer and heart disease, into every health care plan and to make preventive services available to people who otherwise won't or can't go in for it, be it in malls and other public places where it's easy to stop for a test or routine vaccinations like seasonal flu shots.

Measures such as recommended childhood immunization and colorectal cancer screening are not only effective in reducing largely preventable disease and disability, they represent cost effective ways that individuals and society can tame galloping health care treatment costs.

The third step is to stop thinking of health as something we get at the doctor's office but instead as something that starts in our homes, schools and jobs, in our playgrounds and parks, and in the air we breathe and the water we drink.

At the same APHA annual meeting, federal health officials launched "Healthy People 2020 Leading Health Indicators." This release draws attention to "upstream" determinants that affect the public's health and contribute to health disparities in our country from infancy through old age.

In addition to its incorporation of traditional measures of mental and physical health status, the leading health indicators framework will begin to track progress we're making on social

determinants of health and features of the natural and built environment that promote good health for everyone.

As such, the goals of Healthy People 2020 and the leading indicators framework are premised on the idea all Americans should have the opportunity to make the choices that allow them to live a long healthy life, regardless of their education, the size or source of their paycheck, or their ethnic background.

These efforts also embrace the equally powerful, yet simple idea that our prospects for better health begin with where we live, learn, work and play.

The more we begin to see health in these terms, the more opportunities we have to improve the health of the nation and every Nevadan. It's thus time we expand the way we think about health to include how to keep it, not just how to get it back.

For more information on the goals of the Healthy People 2020 initiative and leading health indicators framework, visit www.healthypeople.gov.

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