

To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Bringing you public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



To Your Health– Reducing Chronic Diseases

April 22, 2015

"Health is a dynamic state of wellbeing characterized by a physical, mental and social potential, which satisfies the demands of a life commensurate with age, culture, and personal responsibility."¹ "...Health does not just mean the physical well-being of the individual but refers to the social, emotional, spiritual and cultural well-being of the whole community."²

Following a December op-ed in the Fresno Bee in which I proposed six specific goals for improving public health, I began a series to explore how we can work together on each goal. My first letter in this series described the foundation for individual and community well-being as quality education for every child at each grade level, including preschool. Today let's turn to the second goal: Substantially lower rates of chronic diseases and premature death.

Prevention of chronic diseases is an essential building block for achievement of individual and community well-being. Nationally, as well as statewide and locally, chronic diseases contribute to the significant dual impacts of disability and premature death. These can be quantifiably measured in lives and dollars.

Seven out of ten deaths in the US are due to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, obesity, dementia, arthritis, asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).³

Half of all adults in this country have at least one chronic disease. Having one chronic disease increases the likelihood of having another.³

Moreover, chronic diseases cost Californians \$70 billion in 2002.⁴

Added to this is the fact that, worldwide, approximately half of the burden of disease, as measured by disability adjusted life years (DALY), is projected to be caused by chronic diseases.⁵

The primary factors which contribute to chronic diseases and their consequences are well known. These include, but are not limited to, unhealthy behaviors such as:

- lack of physical activity
- improper nutrition
- use of tobacco products
- excess alcohol consumption
- failure to receive appropriate medical prevention screenings / interventions

A recent editorial in the Fresno Bee asserts that personal initiative trumps government intervention in the control of these unhealthful behaviors.

While it is difficult to dispute that personal responsibility and commitment are vital to improved health, it is equally difficult to dispute that society as a whole has made it too easy for us to default to the unhealthy choice in our day to day life. Still worse, healthy options continue to be unavailable to many.

Every action we take as individuals, and collectively as a community, affects public health.

To best assure our health we must all, as individuals, consciously choose the healthy option as often as possible every day, whether it is taking the stairs, biking to work, choosing vegetables over the doughnut, not smoking that next cigarette, not having that second beer, or making that appointment with the health care provider you've been putting off.

But we must also, as a community, assure that healthy options are universally available. We must construct, together, a culture of health. The current series published in the Fresno Bee on wellness in our valley gives us insight into this.

Eight Pillars of Public Health

All eight "pillars of public health" must engage to support this culture of health and reduce the disability and premature death that results from chronic diseases. In the absence of support of any one of the eight pillars, the structure (this culture of health) collapses.

As *individuals* and *families*, we must make the effort to be physically active on a regular basis, devise and stick to a healthy eating plan, avoid tobacco products, moderate any alcohol use, and see our health care provider regularly.

As *retailers*, we must promote healthy foods and beverages over sugary beverages, processed foods, tobacco products, and alcohol. We must make healthy foods and beverages readily available and reasonably priced.

As *employers*, we must ensure that our employees are offered adequate opportunity for physical activity and healthful snacks, and encourage workplace wellness programs to help control health insurance cost. We must, as well, be certain our workplaces are safe and smoke-free, including the exclusion of e-cigarettes. Finally, we must encourage standing, stretching, or moving in place at meetings, conferences, and work stations.

As **educators**, we must ensure that our students are encouraged to select healthy foods and beverages and make physical activity a priority (gearing the activity to individual needs). We must, as well, incorporate health awareness into every aspect of the curriculum and involve parents in this awareness.

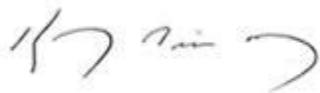
As **medical providers**, we must ensure that **ALL** of our patients are appropriately screened for chronic diseases; that they are knowledgeable of the causes and consequences of these diseases; and that they are optimally managed with diet, physical activity, and medication.

As **leaders of the community**, we must listen to our community members to determine what prevents access to healthy foods, beverages, physical activity, and preventive medical and mental health care; and what increases exposure to tobacco and alcohol. Then, we must commit to action in true collaboration with others to bring about real and lasting change.

As **elected and appointed officials**, we must, in our policy making and regulatory decisions, encourage and provide an environment of accessible and affordable healthy foods and beverages, accessible and safe physical activity opportunities (including quality air), and accessible and affordable preventive medical and mental health care. We must also encourage an environment that limits exposure to tobacco and alcohol products.

I would like to hear from you. What choices are you making to improve the health of your family and community? E-mail me at ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us.

Here's to your health!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ken Bird", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer

Citations:

1. Bircher J. Towards a dynamic definition of health and disease. *Med. Health Care Philos* 2005;8:335-41.
2. National Health and Medical Research Council. Promoting the health of Indigenous Australians. A review of infrastructure support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health advancement. Final report and recommendations. Canberra: NHMRC, 1996: part 2: 4.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
4. California Department of Public Health (CDPH) California Wellness Plan 2014
5. http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/part2_ch1/en/index5.html