

To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

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



Health Illiteracy and Provider Shortage in Fresno County

May 9, 2016

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) has brought changes to our health care and health care coverage systems that were to have resulted in marked improvement in our individual and collective health and well-being. Certainly positive changes include the expansion of clinics in underserved neighborhoods that serve as points of access to medical care previously not available to many in our community.

However, there are two factors in play here in Fresno County and the Central Valley that keep much of the promise of the ACA beyond our grasp. These are our poor health literacy and our insufficient number of health care providers, especially primary care providers. The adverse effect of these two factors, in combination, is more than the sum of the two.

I have been a physician here in the valley for 35 plus years now. I know a little bit about medicine and health care, but I can tell you that at times I have had difficulty obtaining appropriate preventive and specialty care in a timely manner, and without unnecessary roadblocks.

Imagine, however, what your experience might be if you are an individual born here in the valley to parents who, because of limited means, sought medical care for themselves and their family members at the local emergency department only when they were significantly ill or injured. Imagine also that the only preventive care you received growing up was in the form of the standard immunizations offered by the health department and required by the schools, that the concepts of preventive care and a medical home were never introduced to you, and that the rules of health insurance coverage may as well be a foreign language.

Now, as an adult with a family of your own, you find yourself with health care coverage that, whether of greater or lesser value, must provide free preventive evaluation and intervention.

If you are fortunate enough to have been made aware of this opportunity, your first hurdle is finding a provider whose practice isn't already full, and that actually accepts the low reimbursement offered by your coverage plan.

When you finally find a provider, the appointment you are able to make is weeks away and offered only at times frustratingly incompatible with both school and work.

So you obligingly wait and make the necessary arrangements to keep the appointment. However, the hour you allotted from your work or for child care turns into two hours and more waiting in an overcrowded waiting room.

Ideally this is because the provider is taking the time and care to learn, in detail, everyone's health status and what has contributed to it; carefully explaining how best to manage those health determinants; and describing the consequences of not properly managing them.

Sadly, today you discover that because the provider is so pressed for time in an overworked practice you leave a 10 to 15 minute interaction with the provider with nothing more than a lab request slip (with printed directions on where to take it, and where, again, you must make the necessary logistical arrangements), a prescription for a medication you're not sure how to take nor exactly why you're taking, and vague advice about quitting smoking, losing weight, and exercising more. You still don't know what your 140/95 blood pressure means to you and your health, nor the 200 mg/dl random blood glucose.

Certainly this unhappy picture does not play out everywhere here, but where it does, our individual health and well-being suffer, as does the public health.

Both health literacy (the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions) and the number of quality health care providers must improve in our valley in order for our collective health to flourish.

What must the pillars of public health do to make this happen?

Individuals and families must learn what they can about the behaviors that promote good health, implement them in the best way possible, and regularly discuss them with their health care provider. They must learn how to select and obtain the health care coverage best suited to their individual and family circumstances, and how to select a provider that truly addresses their preventive care in an engaging and understandable manner.

Educators must make health, wellness, and preventive medical care a significant part of the educational curriculum at every grade level, weaving it into other instructional areas where possible. They must also provide opportunity for the practice of healthful behaviors throughout the school day.

Employers must provide health care coverage options with proven preventive care value and promote them. They must, as well, provide information on healthful lifestyles in the work place along with ample opportunity to practice healthful behaviors.

Retailers must prioritize promotion of healthful products, activities, and services, and make these affordable.

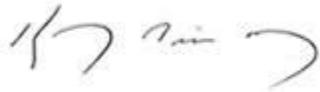
Medical and mental health care providers and insurance plans must make preventive care their priority in decision-making, standard of practice and coverage. They must make every effort to engage their

patients and their patients' families in learning about, and practicing healthful behaviors and lifestyle, anticipating (and providing information on) any and all necessary resources. They must offer preventive visits on days and times when individuals and families are able to take time from their daily struggles to survive. Finally, they must take full advantage of every visit to provide education, resource information, immunization, and screening, and must repeatedly encourage follow up visits.

Community leaders and public officials must assure that everyone has access to health care and that preventive care is incentivized. They must insure awareness, into the farthest corners of the community, of what preventive care is, and what it means to health and well-being. They must assure that healthcare practice in our valley is attractive to diverse and quality providers (financially, professionally, and aesthetically) and must assure that our homegrown healthcare and preventive care talent is maximally encouraged to return or remain here in our community.

None of this will be easy, and will require the highest level of commitment by everyone, but all of it can be done (and must be done if we are to thrive).

Here's to your health!



Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer

ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us

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