

# Prevention is key to addressing healthcare issues

**Jim Riesberg**

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As the chairman of the House Health and Human Services Committee, I will spend much of my time this year focusing on health care needs and our health care delivery systems. One of the first places we must begin is to recognize the impact that chronic diseases have on health and health care in the United States.

Chronic diseases are the No. 1 cause of death and disability in the United States.

One hundred thirty-three million Americans, representing 45 percent of the total population, have at least one chronic disease and chronic diseases kill more than 1.7 million Americans per year and are responsible for 7 of 10 deaths in the United States.

Patients with chronic diseases account for 75 percent of the nation's health care spending.

During 2005, the United States spent almost \$2 trillion on health care, and of every dollar spent, 75 cents went toward treating patients with chronic disease. In public programs, treatment of patients with chronic diseases constitutes an even higher portion of spending: more than 96 cents in Medicare and 83 cents in Medicaid. Neither our nation nor our state can effectively address escalating health care costs without addressing the problem of chronic diseases.

Two-thirds of the increase in health care spending is due to increased prevalence of treated chronic disease.

From 1987-2000 that increase amounted to \$211 billion among the noninstitutionalized U.S. population.

The doubling of obesity between 1987 and today accounts for nearly 30 percent of the rise in health care spending.

The percent of children and youth who are overweight has tripled since 1980. If the prevalence of obesity was the same today as 1987, health care spending in the United States would be 10 percent lower per person — about \$200 billion less.

The vast majority of cases of chronic disease could be better prevented or managed.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least 80 percent of all heart disease, stroke and Type 2 diabetes, and more than 40 percent of cancer would be prevented if only Americans were to do three things: stop smoking, start eating healthy and get in shape. Management of chronic diseases should also be significantly improved: Chronically ill patients receive only 56 percent of the clinically recommended preventive health care services they require.

Many American are unaware of the extent to which chronic disease harms their health — and their wallets.

A 2007 national survey showed that two in three Americans underestimate the magnitude of the problem: That in the United States, chronic diseases represent more than 70 percent of the deaths and 70 percent of health care costs. Care for people with chronic conditions accounts for 81 percent of hospital admissions and 91 percent of all prescriptions filled.

Therefore, chronic disease must become a top priority in health reform efforts. Unfortunately, 96 percent of national health expenditures are spent on medical services, and only 4 percent on prevention. We must work to change that dynamic.

True reform must come from the bottom up, not the top down. It must begin with the individual's behavior change and modification. We must provide the education and knowledge to help change people's attitudes, beliefs and activities. Next, people must develop good relationships with family, peers, social networks and associations that will encourage their decisions and support their new behavior.

Schools, worksites and faith-based groups should help promote prevention and education, and organize opportunities to practice better habits and reward improvement. Our community leaders must also recognize the need to create an improved physical, social and cultural environment when making planning and zoning decisions.

Finally, local, state and federal policies and laws should create a framework to guide decision makers (including public, private, and individuals) and the media to promote healthy living in all discussions about laws and regulations.

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