

Shine: Let's work toward a healthier Texas

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For most of my adult lifetime, the focus of medicine has been on curing rather than preventing illness.

As a cardiologist, my practice centered on people with problems that needed to be fixed. That's true of most specialists and even internists, the best of whom are gifted diagnosticians working to identify conditions while they are still curable or manageable. Too often, patients have done their part to reinforce our role as "healers" by amplifying the effects of genetic predisposition and bad choices by showing up in our offices only when they are ill.

And yet, we all know that the counsel of generations of mothers is true: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Over the last few decades, medicine has begun to take that counsel to heart by stressing the importance of prevention and defining wellness as more than the absence of disease. This change in focus has the potential not only to save and improve millions of lives but, to substantially reduce the cost of health care.

Right now, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer are the root causes of almost two-thirds of deaths in the United States. We cannot eliminate every case of these killers through diet, exercise and forswearing the use of tobacco, but we can

significantly reduce their impact. As individuals, most of us recognize the cause and effect operating here but, as the very human beings that we are, we don't always act wisely on that recognition or live up to our own best intentions. That's understandable.

What is not understandable is that we do not make full use of the public health and health education solutions that would make it easier for us to act in our own best interest. And, we compound the situation by failing to educate our children about healthy living. We all know it is hard to teach old dogs new tricks but we don't apply the corollary that lessons learned in youth stay with us for a lifetime.

Today, in Texas, we are experiencing an epidemic of childhood obesity – one that will inevitably lead to more diabetes, high blood pressure and other disorders as these children grow older. The cost of the complications created by these illnesses is devastating for the children and their families and, as they age and their health worsens, unsustainable for our society.

This week, The University of Texas System is reaffirming its commitment to prevention and wellness through sponsorship of a wellness symposium on the UT Austin campus. Over two days, we will:

—Strengthen policies that lead to implementation of prevention and wellness programs for faculty, staff and students at all UT System institutions.

—Develop recommended approaches for preparing graduates of UT institutions, especially professional schools, as leaders who will promote a

culture of prevention and wellness in work environments such as the public schools and Texas businesses.

—Share strategies and new ideas to promote wellness among students in the public schools and employees of businesses of Texas.

Our goal is to establish the UT System, its six health institutions and affiliated hospitals, and its nine academic campuses as a national leader in this area and to improve the quality of life for all Texans. We cannot prevent every illness or solve every problem but we can, at the very least, make it easier for Texans to be healthy and stay well.

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