Public Health's Urgent Issues

Recent attention to the Zika virus and the tragedy at the Whitewater Center this summer remind us all of the importance of public health measures to prevent illness. These are urgent issues, but they must not overshadow threats that are more common and pervasive. Tobacco use, obesity, unintended pregnancy, HIV infection, and violence are among the most important public health challenges currently facing us. They cause needless suffering, injustice and hardship in our community. Tobacco use and obesity make cancer and heart disease our leading causes of death. Unintended pregnancies are a risk for poor birth outcomes and undermine economic mobility. Rising disparities in HIV infection between blacks and whites are an unacceptable inequity. Direct and indirect exposures to violence have serious long-term health effects.

These conditions are preventable and we can do more to address them. Our local government and health care leaders have a strong history of collaboration on public health outreach and access to medical care. Education and medical services are important components of any intervention, but addressing our current public health challenges will require more comprehensive efforts. Effective approaches require multiple strategies, applied in different settings, supported by community and organizational policies.

Policy interventions protect and promote health and are very effective. Banning smoking in restaurants and bars has protected workers from the substantial dangers of exposure to second-hand smoke. Expanding these protections to all workplaces is an important next step. Policies designed to improve child health are particularly compelling. Because price is a strong deterrent for youth smoking, many communities levy taxes on tobacco products. Interventions to reduce childhood obesity include reducing the availability of sugar-sweetened beverages, and implementing open-use agreements with schools and other institutions to allow after-hours access to playgrounds for children and families.

Not all strategies require policy change. A number of community-based interventions have had extensive impact. New technologies in contraception are safer and more effective than traditional methods. Efforts to make long-acting, reversible contraceptives more widely available in our community could significantly reduce rates of unintended pregnancy. New treatments for HIV have halted the deadly progression of this disease and those who are effectively treated are no longer infectious. Widespread testing for HIV, and use of medications to protect individuals at high risk could reverse current increases in HIV transmission. Violence can be prevented, and evidence-based protocols for law enforcement and human services professionals can mitigate the long-term effects of those exposed to violent acts.

Ultimately, improving health requires changing our community environments. Healthy foods, and safe and inviting places to exercise are not available in many neighborhoods. Modest investments in community and school gardens, farmer's markets and local shops, together with attractive sidewalks and well-maintained parks create a community where it's easier for everyone to make healthy choices, regardless of where they live.
In the past, public health science and actions have had profound success preventing infectious diseases like cholera, tuberculosis and measles that had once been devastating. We now face new and equally challenging public health issues. The means to address them are once more within our reach. There are many actions we can take, each with associated costs and social requirements. We may choose to defer or not pursue some, but we must continue to take action.

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