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Better habits can help trim bloated health care system

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We've resolved to eat better, lace up the running shoes, shed a few pounds, quit smoking and lead healthier lives.

If we could keep our promises beyond the first weekend of the new year, perhaps our health care system wouldn't be as bloated as it is.

Indeed, some of the responsibility for health care costs sits squarely on the shoulders of consumers who make unhealthy choices – by supersizing meals, quenching thirst with sugar-laden sodas, filling lungs with tobacco and taking a less active role in maintaining their overall fitness.

"As important as health reform is, the real answer in reforming America's health care system is to empower individuals to make better choices about what we eat and how we live," said Daniel Zingale, a senior vice president at the California Endowment, a health foundation.

While debate remains in Congress over health care legislation, wellness advocates are hopeful that less controversial provisions promoting healthy living will remain in any bill that reaches the president's desk.

"As preventable illnesses and injuries are the most significant drivers of increasing health care costs," the Oakland-based Prevention Institute said in a letter to the White House, "it is essential that we reorient our health care system from an after-the-fact approach to one that focuses on keeping people healthy in the first place."

The House bill includes \$34 billion for a public health investment fund, including \$15.4 billion for prevention and wellness programs.

The Senate bill is less generous, providing \$15 billion for a prevention and public health fund, some of which could be used for so-called community transformation grants to fund parks and urban trails and to promote access to nutrition.

The Senate bill also would establish a national council that takes a broad approach to drafting a health care strategy that integrates transportation, agriculture, education and employment policies. And it would adopt California's pioneering law requiring fast-food outlets and chain restaurants to provide nutrition information.

"This is the first time in recent history that community and government strategies will align to help support us in the resolutions we make on New Year's Day," said Larry Cohen, the Prevention



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Institute's executive director.

Wellness and prevention have been "totally lost in the discussion over the health care bill," Cohen said, "because it's ... been recognized by both sides as being worthwhile."

Wellness programs spread

By 2017, U.S. health care could account for \$4.3 trillion in annual spending, or a fifth of every dollar spent in the overall economy, according to the National Coalition on Health Care. Much of that could go to preventable conditions linked to obesity, smoking, diabetes and heart disease.

Indirect and direct costs of smoking are now \$193 billion a year, about half spent on medical expenses, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2007, diabetes accounted for \$116 billion. In 2009, heart disease was expected to cost the country \$305 billion for care services, medication and lost productivity, according to the CDC.

Obesity costs the nation as much as \$147 billion annually, according to a government study released in July.

In California, the national symbol for healthy living, one in every four people is now considered obese. In 1985, when the CDC began measuring the nation's expanding girth, 9 percent of the state's residents were classified as obese.

"Sugar-sweetened beverages are the single-biggest culprit in the obesity epidemic," said Harold Goldstein, executive director of the Davis-based California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

"The simplest thing people can do is drink water instead of soda. It would save everybody money in these hard economic times ... and it would have a dramatic impact on the obesity epidemic."

For years, experts have preached healthy living to reduce the rates of chronic conditions.

To save on costs and boost productivity, employers and insurers over the years launched wellness programs to promote healthy habits.

Call The Bee's Bobby Caina Calvin, (916) 321-1067.

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jlibonati wrote on 01/05/2010 07:48:23 AM:

As a Registered Dietitian (RD) and consultant to the food and beverage industry, I agree healthy habits in the home and work place are needed especially to prevent weight gain. Education on healthy habits which includes exercise, as well as calorie balance, is a more sustainable approach in addressing obesity. Additionally, we cannot and should not place blame on any single food, beverage, or nutrient. After all, a calorie is a calorie, which means one can lose weight eating sweets or drinking SSBs or can gain weight eating anything, including vegetables. Knowing how to construct a varied healthy eating and drinking plan is a healthy first step. Enjoy the New Year!

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ANTI_PARTISAN wrote on 01/02/2010 08:16:51 AM:

Instead of spending on special projects, which will simply become some agencies cash cows, we should provide direct incentive to people to be healthy. This could be through lower premiums or tax credits.

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rthero wrote on 01/02/2010 08:04:08 AM:

"The Senate bill also would establish a national council that takes a broad approach to drafting a health care strategy that integrates transportation, agriculture, education and employment policies. "And there's the big power grab, folks. Under the pretext of promoting better health, the government has just given itself greater authority over any and all issues within a huge chunk of the economy. Watch and wait for a myriad of social issues to suddenly become healthcare matters and , thus, under the direct jurisdiction of the federal government to mandate change.

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jonessed wrote on 01/02/2010 08:00:52 AM:

If we want people to be healthier we should set up a system that allows insurance companies to charge people what their healthcare really costs. I don't see why young, healthy people need to pay more so that obese, older people can live in and out of expensive hospital care. That makes no sense.

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