

## **New Spectrum Strategy: Assuring Access to Quality Health Care**

Contra Costa Health Services added the strategy “mobilizing communities” to the Spectrum of Prevention nearly a decade ago to acknowledge the importance of community engagement and partnership with empowered communities. As we have used this new framework, focusing on today’s health problems of heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and other chronic diseases, we have realized the New Spectrum of Prevention is incomplete. Now we add this newest strategy - Assuring Access to Quality Health Care - to acknowledge that access to quality health care is critical for prevention, just as access to healthy food and safe places to exercise help to prevent chronic disease.

In fact, local health departments have been doing preventive medical services for many years, alongside many of the other strategies embraced by the Spectrum. Immunization, for example, is a medical strategy to promote primary prevention, and the elimination of polio in the United States through immunization was one of the greatest triumphs of public health in the last half century. Today medical providers are using primary prevention when they treat high blood pressure and cholesterol, which are risk factors for stroke and cardiovascular disease. However, this treatment is only for those who have access to health care. In Contra Costa, the Public Health Division used strategies from the Spectrum, including community mobilizing, advocating for policy and changing organizational practices, to break down cultural and financial barriers for minority women to receive early mammography and treatment. In this case, increasing access to health care reduced the disparity in the death rate for minority women with cancer.

In another instance of Public Health collaboration with Health Care, our comprehensive obesity prevention strategy now includes New Kids, a weight loss clinic for overweight children and their families. New Kids was a Public Health response to assist doctors at community health centers who were seeing many families with overweight children and had no where to refer them for more intense intervention. Through nutrition education, exercise and cooking classes, New Kids helps prevent overweight kids from developing diabetes type II, from becoming overweight adults, and helps their families adopt healthy lifestyles. Families need to have access to the health care system because doctors refer overweight children to the program and monitor their health status. New Kids is an important intervention to fight obesity along with other changes to the environment, like putting bike lanes on streets, placing good food in neighborhood stores and advocating for healthy vending policy. In this case the Health Department needed a link between health education, ongoing family support and the medical system in order to have a comprehensive approach to preventing poor health outcomes for overweight children and their families. And in Contra Costa County, where our integrated local health department includes public health, a medical center, eight outpatient health centers, mental health and alcohol and other drugs, homeless programs and a health plan that manages care even for our uninsured, the joint role of medical providers and public health in prevention is especially apparent.

We add this new strategy – Assuring Access to Quality Health Care - as a call to action – to encourage public health and the service delivery programs to work together, an effort that began formally more than 10 years ago when the American Medical Association and the American Public Health Association created a joint initiative to bridge the gulf between these two disciplines. That initiative was launched to meet the challenges of increased healthcare costs, persistent growth in the number of uninsured, increased emphasis on healthcare quality and outcomes, epidemics of chronic diseases requiring both clinical and community approaches, ever-widening health disparities and outbreaks of new emerging infectious diseases.<sup>1</sup>

Including this new strategy as part of the constellation of prevention strategies underscores that quality care by itself is not enough to achieve improved health outcomes and reduce health disparities. The new strategy also acknowledges that early medical intervention for chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular problems is prevention. Controlling cholesterol, reducing high blood pressure and controlling diabetes are services provided in the primary care setting and they are vital to prevention of increased morbidity and mortality. At the same time, the rapid epidemic of obesity shows that community and environmental interventions are also absolutely essential to control chronic disease. For low income, uninsured and underinsured Americans, assuring access to quality care – whether that means through access to primary care clinics or to inpatient care at public hospitals – is an essential ingredient for preventing diseases and improving health outcomes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Medicine and Public Health Initiative Ten Years Later. Beitsch et al. American Journal of Preventive Medicine. Volume 29. Number 2. 2005