



April 10, 2008

Dear Editor:

The April 8 article "In the Balance" suggests the role of prevention is overrated when considering the costs associated with such practices. Unfortunately, despite citing some well-known studies, the article does little to help the public consider the most cost-efficient means to improve health and reduce health care costs.

While it may sometimes be true that prevention costs more than treatment, we should not be reduced to perceiving health benefits only in terms of the cost of investment. Instead we must consider the value of our investments in health to individuals as well as to society.

Some clinical preventive services such as counseling for tobacco cessation, aspirin use to prevent heart disease, and immunizations do in fact save medical care dollars. Others don't, but for the dollars invested, they yield overall health benefits, such as improved quality of life; benefits that surpass those received through standard medical practice that focus on diagnosis and treatment.

In considering costs to society, we need only look at the employment sector to see the need for and success of prevention. Risk factors for disease and illness are the best predictors of employer healthcare costs and of total productivity costs. Promotion of healthy behaviors and preventive services among employees lead to reductions in health risks while increasing worker productivity. That's why employers, who tend to be more careful about spending money than the government, are shifting their employee health care investments upstream. They know that productivity losses account for about three quarters of the costs associated with poor employee health, while only about a quarter of the costs are for health care claims. Their investments in targeted worksite health promotion, onsite clinics, and proactive human resource policies to promote health are sound. Simply put healthy workers make for a healthier economy!

Clarifying what we mean by the term prevention is a necessary and useful exercise that helps us demonstrate that prevention increases the overall value of our health investments. The bottom line is, prevention works

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael D. Parkinson, MD". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael D. Parkinson, MD, MPH, FACPM
President