

## THE MYTH OF PREVENTION

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Dr. Helen Hackman, for many years director of the Arlington County (Va.) Department of Human Resources, is convinced that health education—besides being a waste of money—doesn't work. Writing as guest editorialist in *Modern Medicine* (April 15, 1978), she labels preventive medicine "the golden myth of American medical care."

The concept of preventive medicine, particularly as it has been promoted in recent years by politicians, press and health industry "experts," is a nebulous one. To idealists it is easy to conceive that great amounts of health care money can be saved by preventing disease instead of waiting for it to develop and then treating it. Experienced and practical clinicians have known for a long time that it just doesn't work that way.

In this country, during the first quarter of this century and for a decade or so thereafter, great progress was made in the broad field of preventive medicine. Most of the productive measures were instituted by the U.S. Public Health Service in cooperation with medical schools and the AMA, and with the backing of state and federal government. These corrective, community-oriented programs dealt effectively with sanitation, sewage disposal, pure water supplies, infectious diseases, insect and pest control, food inspection and public and private immunization. In addition, our economic climate provided the housing, the clothing, the abundant food supply and the favorable environment from which many generations of Americans now have profited immensely.

But according to Dr. Hackman, active efforts of individuals have a minimal effect on the three main factors that influence health and longevity, namely, heredity, environment and life style. She believes that we can do nothing about the first, only a little about the second, and that, unfortunately, we have "an inadequate disposition to do much about the third."

In the most recent quarter-century, we have had an over abundance of health planning aimed at preventing disease, increasing longevity and improving the quality of life. Millions and millions of dollars have been spent in an attempt to educate us about mental health, cancer and the evils of cigarettes, venereal disease, illegitimacy, alcoholism, drug abuse, sex, pollution and the benefits of proper nutrition, family planning and automobile safety. All of the programs have either failed miserably, worsened the problems (as in the cases of drug abuse, sex and illegitimacy), or produced no significant improvement.

Dr. Hackman characterizes our efforts and results over the past 15 years as "sorry."

She complains that each new health plan emanating from our 205 health systems agencies, as it rediscovers prevention, "spews out the same tired recommendations, more health education in schools, more seminars, more lectures, more of everything that does not work." She believes that the American public has been oversold on illness prevention and that the only beneficiaries of our programs have been the new bureaucrats created, the statisticians and the computer specialists of "Xerox, IBM and other reprographic processors"—all to the tune of ever-escalating costs.

After 20 years of practicing preventive medicine, a discouraged Dr. Hackman feels that there can be no answer to the problem because "most people would rather be sick than sensible." She has now submitted her resignation as a preventive medicine specialist. Her farewell editorial remark was, "I think I'll have a martini."

Make ours a double.

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