

Perhaps, a Solution.

There is a simple solution to the very complex problems facing our healthcare system; turn national attention to the *health* of our citizenry. If we create ways to assure health, then people will not require as much healthcare and the cost will decrease. A lower cost of healthcare will make universal coverage feasible.

First we must acknowledge what keeps us healthy. It is not pills, procedures and surgery that provide health but diet, exercise, sleep and emotional wellbeing. I doubt there is a single person who would deny this. The question is, how do we provide these things? And, should we provide them?

This is not a proposal to change our healthcare system, but rather to support and augment what is in place. Our healthcare system is designed to provide treatment for, not prevention of, illness. Even the factors we describe as “prevention”, such as mammograms and colonoscopies, are in fact early detection. However, we should not try to shoehorn true prevention into the healthcare we provide. We have the NIH, the CDC, medical universities, devoted physicians and brilliant scientists, all of which provide state of the art innovation to address complex medical issues. Our healthcare system has the capability to be amazing, but it is overloaded by preventable disease.

What we need instead is to establish a federal “health policy”, separate from but encompassing healthcare, that establishes guidelines to be applied to all things federal. Such as? Transportation, agriculture, business, education, and of course healthcare. We need to put in place a system that addresses the diseases of prosperity—diseases that come about because of processing and automation.

The elements of a healthy life—diet, exercise, sleep, emotional well being—are presently relegated to “lifestyle choices”. We remain baffled as to how to make people make healthy choices because we assume that people really can, and simply do not, choose well. But what if this free choice is an illusion? We are blinded by the vast array of so called “choices”—thousands of brands of potato chips, for instance, and soda. Our transportation, too, and where we live. We assume because many of us can purchase healthy food, or efficient cars, that anyone can choose these things. But think about how limited your choices are when you don’t have much money. Consider also what you yourself might change in your daily life if you could, such as what you eat or how much time you spend outside rather than in a car.

The more concrete elements of the 4 cornerstones of health are diet and exercise. First let us look at diet. Our food supply is saturated by processed food, high in calories and low in nutrition. For various reasons, the least healthy food is also the least expensive. To solve this dilemma, establish a definition of “food” that clarifies a certain ratio of nutrition to calories. Anything under that ratio will not qualify as food—we could refer to it as “junk food” or “snacks” instead—and would be taxed. The tax money, of course, would then subsidize healthy food. Such an idea is not mine alone, writers such as Michael Pollan (in *Omnivore’s Dilemma*) have suggested this approach.

Exercise is at once complicated and simple. It is as simple as walking to work, or the train, or the store. Complicated, because walking has become such an impossibility in the daily lives of most people. If people even have safe places to walk, then they must create time to do so; not always easy if you work two jobs, or are raising children alone, or are unable to organize your time well. The solution—create a public transportation system organized around walking and biking. Allow walking to be incorporated automatically into the daily commute, so that people don't even need to think about it.

The timing for a massive undertaking such as a national public transportation system could not be better, as we struggle with the overarching issue of global warming; furthermore, there is the economic crisis that includes the auto industry, and the national security issue of foreign oil. Add to this the fact that our present infrastructure is crumbling, and it is clear that restructuring transportation would not only be feasible, but could actually solve many enormous problems simultaneously. Given the astronomical costs of our present healthcare system, and the fact that despite these costs so many Americans are in poor health and without healthcare, the savings we could see from improved health could reduce the overall costs an updated transportation system would incur.

If it is difficult to fully visualize exactly how such a system would lead to better health, imagine this: high-speed rail systems along highway median strips; trolleys and busses within and between towns, with stops every mile to allow walking; walking and bicycle paths along routes and within towns. In rural areas, variations on carpooling could be devised. A critical component would include the means for children to safely walk and bike to school: such as paths, adult and police supervision, and traffic control. Even children who are bussed could purposefully be dropped off a half mile or so from the school. Finally, maintenance of the system would mirror the dedication we have for our present road system. Too often, especially in the northeast where I live, sidewalks are dismissed from consideration because towns do not have the funds or ability to maintain them.

There are interests that will be less than supportive of such a proposal. Profits from oil, automobiles, processed food, and health care would be threatened if people were able to opt out of driving, were able to eat healthier food, and were healthier overall. In fact, I have reflected that the reason we are facing this crisis in health, is because health is a default state (again, a concept Michael Pollan refers to); one does not need to pay anyone to stay healthy, after all. So, who profits if we are healthy? The answer, of course, is all of us.