



Putting the Public's Health into the Health Care Reform Debate

By State Representative Tina Kotek

The current debate about national health care reform has been fascinating to watch. The variety of discourse and the energy around it, both positive and negative, really has people talking about their health. Good things will eventually come out of this public conversation. For instance, there is now a tremendous opportunity for the public health community to make its case. If people are talking reform, let's really talk about health. After all, what is more cost-effective than true primary prevention?

Your advocacy in the public policy arena is absolutely essential to influencing this landscape. Legislative action is a powerful way to improve public health. Laws can limit smoking, keep our air and water clean, and move people to change their eating habits. By cultivating public health allies among your state and federal legislators, you can influence the current health reform debate and beyond.

The challenge to successfully making a case for new investments and innovations in public health is the unrelenting focus on health insurance reform and health care delivery improvements. Don't get me wrong – I'm a strong proponent of primary care medicine. We need to make the front-end of the delivery system a higher priority than expensive specialty and hospital care. But the remedy for improving the health of our country cannot rest solely on making sure more people get their annual checkups or visit their primary care doctor before they get really sick.

True prevention focuses on keeping people healthy. That's what you do, in the public health community. The health care system is complex. Anyone who has been seriously ill or had a sick family member can tell you that in unending detail. So it's no surprise that clearly communicating the intricacies of reforming the system to people who are not immersed in the topic is daunting. Public health is a lot simpler to explain. People understand that helping people to stop smoking, be more active, eat better, get their vaccinations, drink safe water, and breathe clean air is the way to go.

As health (reform) advocates, you need to consistently frame the conversation around improving people's health, not just talking about what their health insurance coverage could look like. While the debate about the "public option" is

all the rage, why not encourage a solution-oriented discussion about what options are best for the public?

Let's translate the energy from the health care reform conversation into substantive public health policy changes. As a legislator, I depend on the public health community to be my eyes and ears on the front lines of improving the health of individuals and their neighborhoods. During the 2009 Oregon legislative session, I worked alongside advocates to pass a statewide menu labeling bill that will provide consumers with the nutritional information they need to make healthier choices when eating out at chain restaurants. My motivation to champion this legislation was rooted in evidence about people's behaviors and choices. A study in New York City found that fast food customers who saw calorie information when ordering purchased 52 fewer calories on average than those who did not. Since cutting only 100 calories per day could prevent weight gain in the majority of the population, that difference means better health – and lower health care costs – for all of us.

The need for creative community-based prevention strategies will continue to exist, regardless of what national health care reform looks like. The key for the public health community is to use the momentum from national health care reform to form strategic coalitions that successfully push for innovative public health legislation at local, state and national levels. And don't be afraid to get political or push back on entrenched constituencies. When insurance companies, hospitals, and health care providers are in the driver's seat, we all lose because the fundamental benefits of true primary prevention get left along the side of the road. So, dust yourself off, hitch a ride on the reform bandwagon, and bring the public's health back into the fray. ■

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