



The Role of Physicians in Prevention and Health Promotion

Health care professionals, including physicians, play an essential role in promoting health and preventing disease among all Canadians. A significant proportion of death, illness and injury in Canada is preventable. These preventable health problems place a substantial burden of suffering on individuals, families and communities as well as a heavy burden on society because they draw on scarce health care resources.

The World Health Organization defines health promotion as "the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health."¹ Health promotion activities generally seek to influence either a person's individual behaviours such as smoking and sedentary lifestyle. Effective health promotion also addresses the broader social determinants of health, for example, income, access to services and physical environment.

The CMA views prevention and health promotion as a responsibility to be shared among all health care providers, rather than the sole responsibility of any one group or specialty.

At a collective level, medical and other health organizations can be involved in prevention and health-promotion activities such as organizing public education campaigns, advocating for legislation that promotes health, such as laws to control pollution and tobacco products, and disseminating clinical practice guidelines to enhance standards of preventive care. At an individual level, the role of physicians in the continuum of patient care is an important one, with the potential for further enhancement, and can include:

Health enhancement: As part of daily practice, physicians routinely offer information to support the prevention of disease. These activities include appropriate discussions with patients about nutrition, physical activity and access to social supports. In providing these services, physicians consider the social, economic and environmental conditions in which their patients live.

Risk avoidance: Physicians ensure that people take measures that will prevent specific risks of disease. Examples include providing immunizations, promoting breast-feeding, physical activity and the use of bicycle helmets.

Risk reduction: Physicians screen, counsel and work with individuals or segments of the population at higher risk of disease or injury to reduce their risk. Examples include screening for risk factors for the development of heart disease or diabetes, such as nutrition, smoking and alcohol use.

Early identification: Physicians screen people to detect diseases at an asymptomatic stage, when intervention can improve the outcome. Papanicolaou smears to detect cancer of the cervix and breast exams to detect breast cancer are two types of tests being used in early detection. With the increase in public awareness and interest in prevention, physicians often spend time with their patients discussing the pros and cons of tests such as mammographic screening of women and the prostate-specific antigen screening test for men.

Complication reduction: Physicians can prescribe therapy to prevent complications in patients with diagnosed conditions or diseases. For example, the use of medication to reduce the incidence of stroke or myocardial infarction in high risk patients.

Recommendations

- 1) Physicians should continue to incorporate all levels of health promotion and disease prevention into their practices, emphasizing activities for which there is sufficient scientific evidence.
- 2) Education in prevention and health promotion both at an individual and at a collective level, should be given high priority in undergraduate medical programs, in residency training and in continuing medical education.
- 3) Physicians should be encouraged to work with other health care professionals in the office setting and the community to enhance delivery of care that incorporates prevention and health promotion.
- 4) Remuneration systems should support a multidisciplinary approach to the delivery of these services; they should also support the provision of these services by individual physicians.
- 5) Patients should have access to a family physician who can provide care that includes prevention and health promotion. Family physicians should continue to develop professional relationships with their patients that encourage the long-term promotion and maintenance of good health.
- 6) Clear, simple and current guidelines for prevention and health promotion services should be widely distributed to physicians. The Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care regularly develops and updates guidelines in this area.
- 7) Simple, easy-to-understand patient guidelines for prevention and health promotion should be developed and made available to the public. Physicians should continue to develop, improve and promote patient-counselling programs and office-management systems that encourage effective delivery of preventive care and health promotion.

- 8) Governments should give high priority to public policies that take account of the broad range of determinants of health, and proposed legislation should be routinely reviewed for any impact on the health of individuals and the community. CMA, in collaboration with other health professions and governments, will continue to explore means to ensure that public policies are developed with due attention paid to their potential health consequences.

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¹ World Health Organization. *Health Promotion*. Geneva: WHO; 2018. Available: https://www.who.int/topics/health_promotion/en/ (accessed 2019 Jan 8).