

Physicians and health promotion

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Pimlott makes the telling point that there are simply not enough hours in the day for physicians to follow all the guidelines on preventive health care. But that happens even without considering the important – but widely neglected task – of counselling patients as to how they might beneficially improve their diet and lifestyle. And even if physicians did have the time, they don't have the training to give appropriate advice. For example, most physicians have an inadequate knowledge of nutrition (1). And where physicians have attempted to implement health promotion in their practices, success has been modest at best (2). In brief there are too many barriers preventing physicians from becoming effective practitioners of health promotion.

What is needed is a paradigm shift in approach to preventive health care. Here I make some proposals with regard to diet and lifestyle. What makes most sense is a whole new class of health-care professional, with a specialization in health promotion. Such people would dispense advice across the whole lifestyle spectrum, including nutrition, exercise, smoking cessation, STD-avoidance, and behaviour modification. Working closely with physicians, they would provide the assistance with the following typical challenges: • What diet modifications should be suggested to the mother of a teenager who prefers fast food restaurants? • What suggestions are most appropriate to increase intake of fruit and vegetables for a low-income 70-year-old on a low income? • What dietary supplements should be recommended for a patient who smokes? • What is the appropriate advice for an obese 50-year-old with arthritis who wants to start an exercise program? • What suggestions should be made to a woman who wants to cajole her husband to quit smoking?

Many of the skills required for the new class of health-care professional are already possessed by dietitians. But clearly, the required skills go much further. What is needed, therefore, is a modified version of a training program for dietitians (i.e., a four-year nutrition degree followed by an internship) but with extra courses in such subjects as kinesiology and health promotion.

1. Temple NJ. Survey of nutrition knowledge of Canadian physicians. *J Am Coll Nutr* 1999;18:26-9.

2. Temple NJ, Nestle M. Population nutrition, health promotion, and government policy. In: Temple NJ, Wilson T, Jacobs DR, eds. *Nutritional Health: Strategies for Disease Prevention*, second ed. Totowa, New Jersey: Humana Press, 2006.

Conflict of Interest:

None declared