

Feds Release National Prevention Strategy

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
FROM THE NATIONAL PREVENTION COUNCIL

The federal government plans to help Americans live healthier lives not only by focusing on improving access to health care services, but also by reducing pollution, keeping children from abusing drugs, and serving nutritious school lunches. That's according to the first-ever National Prevention Strategy, released last month.

The new strategy was mandated under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and with it federal officials have created a blueprint for themselves, as well as states, businesses, and community leaders to follow in

building healthier communities. The 122-page document lays out seven priority areas based on evidence-based recommendations for improving health and prolonging life: tobacco-free living, preventing drug abuse and excessive alcohol use, healthy eating, active living, injury- and violence-free living, reproductive and sexual health, and mental and emotional well-being.

The strategy document sets a number of goals and 10-year targets for measuring progress. For example, as part of the effort to increase the use of preventive services in the health care system, the strategy calls on physicians to inform patients about the benefits of preventive services, adopt and use certified electronic health records and personal health records, and adopt medical home- or team-based care models. One 10-year target is to increase the proportion of medical practices that use electronic health records from 25% to 27.5%.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said the strategy was

part of a "new focus on prevention" started by President Obama. The National Prevention Strategy will build off earlier efforts, some of which were included in the ACA, to curb tobacco use and give Americans free or low-cost access to preventive services such as mammograms.

"We know that prevention helps people live long and productive lives and can help combat rising health care costs," Ms. Sebelius said.

The work on prevention was praised by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chair of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, who has been a long-time advocate of moving the U.S. health care system away from a sick care system and toward a well care system.

The ACA created the National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council (National Prevention Council), which developed the National Prevention Strategy, along with input from outside advisers. The council is made up of the heads of 17 federal agencies and is chaired by the U.S. Surgeon General. Along with the council, the ACA authorized the Prevention and Public Health Fund, which provides nearly \$18 billion for public health programs. That fund is an important source of money for state and local governments looking to make improvements to their communities, Sen. Harkin said.

But the Prevention and Public Health Fund has been caught up in political fighting over the ACA. Earlier this year, Rep. Joe Pitts (R-Pa.) sponsored legislation (H.R. 1217) to eliminate the fund, calling it an "Obamacare slush fund." In April, the House approved the legislation but the bill has not been taken up in the Senate, where Democrats hold the majority. ■

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Technology Boosts Diabetes Care

Diabetes care and outcomes were superior in facilities using electronic health records, compared with care at facilities with paper-based records, according to a report by Better Health Greater Cleveland for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Researchers compiled data on care such as eye exams and outcomes such as blood sugar control from 32 health centers in the Cleveland area using EHRs and from 5 using paper. More than half of the patients at EHR-based clinics received all necessary care; only 7% of patients who went to paper-based clinics did. Similarly, 44% of those at EHR-based clinics achieved positive outcomes, compared with 16% at paper-based clinics. The report noted that the federal government has committed \$27 billion to EHRs and other health information technology over the next 10 years. It added that the Cleveland data show that using EHRs results in "dramatically better patient care."

New Diabetes-Help Videos

A new series of 3- to 5-minute videos, part of the redesigned National Diabetes Education Program online library, addresses topics such as living with diabetes, finding support, preventing diabetes, and setting goals to improve health. "For more than 14 years, the NDEP has been in the forefront of raising awareness about diabetes, but more needs to be done to provide resources and tools to support health care providers and their patients when it comes to achieving and sustaining health goals," Dr. Griffin P. Rodgers, director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, one of the sponsors of NDEP, said in a statement. The videos are available at www.YourDiabetesInfo.org/HealthSense, which includes a tab for health care professionals.

Another Try for Diabetes Bill

Two congressmen have reintroduced the Gestational Diabetes Act, which passed the House last year but stalled in the Senate. Rep. Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Michael C. Burgess (R-Tex.), a physician, said that the fight against gestational diabetes is a bipartisan effort and needs continued attention. "The statistics speak for themselves — mothers diagnosed with gestational diabetes are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes, and their children are at an increased risk not only for diabetes but other prenatal complications as well," Rep. Burgess said in a statement. The bill (H.R.2194) aims to enhance surveillance and public health research on gestational diabetes, provide grants for reducing incidence of the condition, and expand research and treatments.

Smoking Is Risk in Obese Girls

Adolescent girls who are obese are twice as likely as others to become heavy smokers, according to the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health survey. The authors controlled for demographic differences and factors such as smoking by parents and friends in analyzing the more than 4,000 survey responses. Family smoking turned out to be the strongest predictor of nicotine addiction, and a high grade point average mediated the girls' risk of becoming heavy smokers. "Obese, adolescent females may require targeted interventions to address their risk of subsequent high-level nicotine addiction, especially if risk factors such as parental smoking and poor school performance are present," the authors concluded in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

IOM Addresses Childhood Obesity

Health care providers should monitor weight and height as part of every well-child visit and should help parents learn ways to increase physical activity and decrease sedentary behavior to curb early childhood obesity, according to a report from the Institute of Medicine. The report urges pediatricians and others who work with infants to encourage breastfeeding and to provide guidance on healthy eating strategies. In addition, health care providers should counsel parents on limiting television and other media use, and should urge parents and other caregivers not to permit televisions or other media devices in young children's bedrooms or sleeping areas. The IOM report details steps policy makers and federal programs can take to help curb early childhood obesity.

Privacy Notification Planned

A proposed change in health insurance-privacy rules would give patients the right to see reports on who has accessed their protected health information electronically. The change was mandated by the 2009 Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act. Although health care providers are required to track this information, they don't have to share it with patients. "This proposed rule represents an important step in our continued efforts to promote accountability across the health care system, ensuring that providers properly safeguard private health information," said Office of Civil Rights Director Georgina Verdugo. "We need to protect people's rights so that they know how their health information has been used or disclosed."

—Naseem S. Miller

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