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AS I SEE IT STEPHEN F. GAMBESCIA

Stressing prevention

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In January 2007 Gov. Ed Rendell presented one of the most ambitious plans among states to improve the health of their residents. The "Prescription for Pennsylvania" offered 47 ideas on how to cut health care costs by focusing on better chronic disease management, medical errors, public health initiatives and coverage for the uninsured.

Certainly, there have been many initiatives by former governors to address costs and coverage of health care in the state. What is new in this plan is that there is more than lip service to health promotion disease prevention strategies.

Responding to one of the first major initiatives from the plan to transform chronic disease delivery among select population in the state, former Surgeon General Richard H. Caromona recently wrote a commentary for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* advocating for the need to invest in preventing chronic disease and "change the overall culture to our nation from focusing on disease treatment to embracing disease prevention."

One health care provider that is missing from the health care team, if we are serious about this change of culture to disease prevention and wellness, is the professionally prepared health educator. Health educators are specialists who use a variety of education, communication and behavioral strategies to encourage and enable individuals and communities to live healthy lifestyles to prevent or manage disease and other health risks. Unfortunately, the state Health Department and county health departments, as well as other organizations, use far too few, if any, professionally prepared health educators.

Many health care professionals use "education for health" strategies, which is important and useful. However, professionally prepared health educators are equipped to assess, plan, implement and evaluate large-scale health promotion/disease prevention programs to populations at a variety of sites: schools, workplaces, neighborhoods and health care sites.

This relatively new profession has well-defined education, training and certification requirements. Certified health education specialists have a minimum of a college degree in this field and take a national certification exam validating their knowledge and competency to work in this important area of health care.

A health education specialist is an expert in designing and delivering evidence-based, cost-effective health education programs that really work. They are great consultants that enhance any health care team and can act as resources for a variety of health and safety initiatives at the group, organizational, community and public policy levels. THE PREMATURE death rates in the United States have dropped dramatically since the late 1800s. We have moved through two major ages for strategies to improve lifespan. The

first was the age of large-scale public health and environmental controls (1885-1935). The second was our favored age of medicine (1935-1948).

We are now in a third age -- the age of lifestyle, beginning in the 1950s. Here we will continue with major public health measures and look to the miracles of medicine, but also need to recognize that in order to extend lifespan and improve the quality of life at an older age, we need to manage chronic disease.

Even the best medicinal approaches to managing chronic disease will need appropriate and effective health education activities, programs and policies at all levels. Health educators can assist in this role and need to be a part of the "prescription plan" for Pennsylvanians.

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