

Getting people to move -- challenges in promoting physical activity

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Programs that discourage smoking have been reasonably successful. However, public health programs that encourage physical activity have not. While the benefits of regular physical activity are well documented in the medical literature and the problems associated with a sedentary lifestyle are even more apparent, public health officials struggle for methods to promote increased physical activity that will work in American society.

In a study published in the January 2007 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers examine the challenges in promoting physical activity in a society less and less inclined to walk, run or exercise.

Writing in the article, Antronette K Yancey, MD, MPH, at the UCLA School of Public Health, states, "Although the science of physical activity promotion is advancing rapidly, the practice of promoting physical activity at a population level is in its infancy. The virtual absence of a public health practice infrastructure for the promotion of physical activity at the local level presents a critical challenge to chronic disease, and particularly obesity, control policy."

The authors examined the current public health infrastructure and found that there are political and systemic barriers to effective physical activity promotional efforts. Competing interests have often conspired to hamper such programs. For example, funding public school Physical Education often loses out to increased money for more academic programs. While

healthy eating to prevent obesity is desirable, demonizing the food industry as the sole cause of obesity undermines the importance of physical activity and deflects attention from activity-restricting consequences of other industries. With the automobile, oil and tire industries putting us in cars and the movie/TV, video game and spectator sports industries putting us in chairs, the public is encouraged to remain sedentary. The message that there is a fuller spectrum of benefits from physical activity is easily lost.

Dr. Yancey continues, "Physical activity promotion constitutes a critical role for public health practice, given the increasing prevalence of inactivity and sedentary behavior, the substantial protection against obesity and chronic disease conferred by regular physical activity, the major contribution of sedentariness and obesity to health disparities and the increasing understanding of the central role that physical activity plays in overall health and quality of life. The public health infrastructure for physical activity promotion, while undeveloped and untested, is not unlike the public health infrastructure for other major health concerns before they were recognized as such. Given the evidence, the time is right to move forward with putting the infrastructure into place. To not do so is to place future generations at risk."

Source: Elsevier Health Sciences

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