

INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE

PROMOTING HEALTH

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FROM SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH



Approximately half of all causes of mortality in the United States are linked to social and behavioral factors such as smoking, diet, alcohol use, sedentary lifestyles, and accidents. Yet less than 5% of the approximately \$1 trillion spent annually on health care in the United States is devoted to reducing risks posed by these preventable conditions. And despite recent breakthroughs in efforts to map the human genome, the outlook for improving the nation's health will not improve unless greater resources and effort are devoted to addressing the behavioral and social factors that account for the majority of disease, disability, and death in the United States.

According to a recent report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), *Promoting Health: Intervention Strategies from Social and Behavioral Research*, the key to helping people enjoy longer, healthier lives is to understand how to promote behavioral change and create healthier environments. The report, prepared by a committee of 11 scientists, clinicians, and public health experts, states that social interventions need to focus attention not only on individual behavior, but also on the social forces in the environment that shape and support such behavior.

“We know that the greatest improvements in the nation's health will result from a better understanding of social and behavioral factors that affect health,” stated S. Leonard Syme, Ph.D., chair of the IOM study committee and an emeritus professor of public health at the University of California at Berkeley. “We know, for example, that six of the ten leading causes of death are behaviorally based, and that social and behavioral factors account for about half of all the causes of death in the United States.”

The IOM committee noted that many of the same social and behavioral factors are implicated in the development of a broad range of diseases. The social and economic conditions created by poverty, for example, are associated with higher levels of almost all causes of illness and death. However, current public health efforts focus on improving health by attempting to reduce the prevalence of specific diseases, such as cardiovascular disease or cancer. According to the report, these efforts should be balanced with greater effort to address the fundamental behavioral and social causes of disease.

Behavioral and social influences on health are complex, and no single intervention, or set of interventions, is likely to address all of these influences, thus health experts must use multiple approaches (e.g., education, social support, laws, incentives, behavior change programs) and address multiple levels of influence simultaneously (i.e., individuals, families, communities, nations). Efforts to reduce the number of Americans who smoke, for example, must not only take into account the physiological and psychological effects of nicotine addiction, but must also address larger issues, such as the influence of friends, family members, and colleagues who smoke; the availability of tobacco products; and the number of public places where smoking is allowed.

The report also notes that children should be a major focus of intervention efforts. Many of the risk factors observed in adults can be detected in childhood, such as high blood

pressure, overweight, and poor respiratory function. The committee states that the “evidence is that interventions in early life can change the trajectory of these risk factors. A compelling case can be made for focusing attention on insuring that children get a strong start with appropriate early education, immunization, [and] injury prevention, and appropriate attention to nutrition and physical activity.”

The committee also reported that successful interventions involve communities as partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of interventions. “The best intervention results have been achieved when people who benefit from interventions work closely with researchers and public health practitioners. This phenomenon emphasizes the fact that those in the health community have ‘messages’ while individuals in target communities have ‘lives.’ A partnership between these two groups offers the best chance to bridge this divide.”

For More Information . . .

Copies of *Promoting Health: Intervention Strategies from Social and Behavioral Research* are available for sale from the National Academy Press; call (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area), or visit the NAP home page at www.nap.edu. The full text of the report is available online at www.nap.edu.

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