

Health Care v. Sickness Care (Part One)

By **Tony Pearson**

Health is the cornerstone of well-being. As an example, consider the business tycoon John D. Rockefeller. In his 250s, he was the richest man in the world and also suffering from a variety of severe intestinal illnesses. He would tell his chauffeur: 'I would give half my fortune for your stomach.'

But Rockefeller then took control of his own health which improved, not as a result of medical intervention, but because he effectively retired in his late 50's and reduced his stress level (which had caused all his hair to fall out). He switched from ruthless business practices to philanthropy. And his health improved so much that he lived to nearly 100. (It helped that he never smoked nor drank.)

When we think about health programs, we tend to focus on the last lines of defence - doctors and hospitals. These also happen to be the most expensive elements. Health care spending by the Ontario government now amounts to about \$50 billion a year - 40 per cent of the total budget. Of that, payments to doctors account for about a quarter of this spending, or about 10 per cent of all Ontario government spending. Hospitals cost even more: more than \$15 billion, or about a third of the health budget.

With so much of the population rapidly aging, this level of spending, if left unchecked, will grow to the point where it consumes two-thirds and more of the provincial budget, and squeezes other important government programs out of existence.

Reforming the health-care system is about more than just protecting Ontario's fiscal well-being. It's also a question of improving people's well-being. However, that comes at a price - not taxes, but personal inconvenience.

About a quarter of all health care costs arise from preventable causes. The more people stop smoking, the more the expenses of treating lung cancer are drastically reduced. If fewer people were overweight, then the incidence of diabetes would fall. If more people exercised regularly, the costs of dealing with heart problems would drop.

Terry Van Bakel said when she had to close Bancroft's Core Health Fitness gym: Being healthy and fit takes work and dedication. Our quick fix culture and so-called health care, which is really 'health crisis care,' have left people relying on someone to save them when they are sick - just take a pill and feel better. No matter how many studies come out that say exercise and eating right will eliminate 80 per cent of all chronic illness, we don't do it - because it takes work.

Too true. I used to be very fit; now I'm not. I used to go years without seeing a health practitioner. Now I make regular visits. I'm starting to cost the system money.

Assigning me a personal trainer would cost less than seeing a slew of doctors for my joints and lungs. But that's preventive medicine, and we're fixated on remedial medicine.

A better use of health-care dollars would be funding recreation facilities, and doing a lot more education on healthy lifestyles. Imagine how much we'd be paying for lung cancer treatment today if federal and provincial governments hadn't so aggressively laboured to reduce the smoking rate through public education. But their efforts paid off; the percentage of the population who smokes has been cut by more than half. Imagine if we could get the same results for exercise and eating habits.

Of course, people will still get sick or injured. Unfortunately, our sickness-based system often promotes more illness.

We need a health system that puts the emphasis on health, not sickness. More in my next column...