

FOOD PROTECTION INSIDE REPORT, MARCH 1988

Commentary...

The Myth of Modern Medicine

by

Larry J. Gordon, MS, MPH

Secretary, New Mexico Health and Environment Department

We are a romantic people. When it comes to health, we have romanticized medicine to an exceptional degree. We try to convince ourselves that we have the best medical care, and that we are the healthiest people on Earth, and that our good health is due to our good medicine.

This is a myth. Like all myths, there is some substance to it, but to attribute our good health primarily to the wonder of modern medicine is romantic. Though advances in curative and restorative medicine have been dramatic, the major conquests in improving and lengthening human lives have happened outside the customary practice of medicine. These conquests are primarily due to prevention --- public health, environmental health, and regulation.

The life and death struggle with serious illness and injury is heroic, profoundly humanitarian, and in every sense noble. When serious illness occurs in my family, my first and overwhelming concern is to call a good physician.

But our preoccupation with curative and restorative medicine and health care has obscured an important reality about health. In many cases, the battle has already been lost when illness or injury occurs.

The major victories in the war against disease and death are not won by physicians practicing high-tech medicine or attending sick patients, but by practitioners of prevention working with the community to break the chain of events that produce illness, injury, or death.

Such seemingly unglamorous public health initiatives as immunization, pasteurization of milk, chlorination of water, treatment of sewage, and burying sewer pipes in the ground have done more to enhance the status of the public's health than all the collective actions taken in the private practice of medicine.

In contrast to the high drama of curative and restorative medicine, prevention is almost dull. Because we love drama and romance, and prevention is perceived as having little of either, we have been slow to popularize disease prevention and health promotion.

Though prevention is clearly a part of our tradition, its importance is just beginning to penetrate our notions about good health. But despite this, prevention has quietly produced an almost miraculous reduction in disease and death due to contaminated food, water, and air; malnutrition; communicable diseases; and hazards of the workplace and the environment.

Such is the nature of disease prevention. Prevention requires that the community and the individual take straightforward, unromantic steps in the absence of any immediate crisis to produce an outcome which is distinctly unexciting -- the absence of disease. The real pleasure of success in prevention is when "nothing's happening."

Excerpt from a convocation address at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, May 16, 1987