Persistent health inequities, poor return on the investment of healthcare expenditures, and the fragility of our nation’s healthcare infrastructure have been amplified in 2020. COVID has impacted us all, especially those with obesity and co-morbidities. Calls for racial justice have illuminated health disparities and the ways in which our healthcare system is not equitable. Financial barriers to care, including rising insurance premiums, high deductibles, and co-pays, decrease access and lead to the avoidance or delay of services for health problems that worsen when left unrecognized.

Despite spending 18% of our GDP on healthcare, Americans experience worse health outcomes in numerous categories compared to comparable countries. Many experts consider the disproportionate spending on the delivery of healthcare services, in lieu of a greater investment in public and population-focused community health measures, to be a misalignment of national priorities.

As we anticipate the problems that face us in the year ahead, we should use this moment to reconsider how we view health and commit to a more holistic and equitable approach toward health and wellbeing.

**Aligning Priorities around Health**

Health extends beyond the absence of disease, to include the ways an individual can live well despite illness and attain a sense of wellbeing regardless of their circumstance. Dating back to 1948, the World Health Organization defines health as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” However, with longer lifespans and a significant proportion of Americans who manage two or more chronic health problems, this ideal of “health” is out of reach for many, especially the elderly.

From a public policy perspective, factors that impact health can be visualized within a pyramid. The foundation of health is comprised of the socioeconomic factors that constitute social determinants of health, represented here as the base of the pyramid. Clinical interventions, used to address specific individual health needs, should be less common and are represented as the top of the pyramid.
Health is not just the absence of disease, but the actual promotion of wellness and well-being. We should look at all the factors in life and lifestyle that can contribute both to health as well as disease.”

-Dr. Stephen Thompson

In the United States, the allocation of health-related resources is the inverted, with greater attention and spending on the treatment of disease through healthcare services, rather than the promotion of health. Our current healthcare system is oriented to emphasize disease management, which itself may present a barrier for individuals to create health and embody wellbeing regardless of disease state. In fact, many Americans live in and have come to accept a state of unhealth.

While many efforts are underway to reform what is often referred to as a “broken” healthcare system, we must train our focus to the ways we can create health as well.

Health Through a Different Lens
Salutogenesis is an approach to health creation that encompasses a wide range of factors to facilitate health and wellbeing. This model emphasizes the importance of aligning an individual’s attention, resources and capacity to create health, rather than focus on disease. Health behaviors that support salutogenesis include healthy eating, movement, quality sleep, stress reduction, and resiliency. Integrative care providers have long held that health extends beyond the absence of illness or disease. The philosophic roots of many complementary and integrative healthcare disciplines are grounded in salutogenic practices that support the body’s own capacity for healing and wellness. When care is needed, integrative care ascribes to a therapeutic order that prioritizes non-invasive and conservative care modalities first before pharmaceuticals or invasive procedures.

The transactional nature of healthcare should be redefined as a salutogenic partnership between provider(s) and patient, with a primary focus on health creation. Partnering with a patient on their healthcare journey necessitates that the provider understands both the individual and the community in which they live. What would their lives look like if they were as healthy as they could imagine? What would their activities of daily living look like? What would their relationships look like? An individualized approach to care includes helping the individual to orient around what true health and healing looks like for them. This is best achieved when the healthcare encounter creates space for deep listening.

Fundamentals of Health Promotion
A growing body of evidence confirms the connection between behavior and health, and the impact of life-style decisions and habits on our well-being and disease risk. The avoidance of tobacco use, consuming healthy food, regular physical activity and low stress are all modifiable and well-established behaviors that contribute to good health. Boredom, anxiety and conflict in one’s personal relationships may also adversely influence our state of health and wellness. While the evidence linking healthy lifestyle behaviors and prevention of chronic health problems is considerable, the application of lifestyle counseling in clinical practice remains challenging and dependent on competencies that are commonly lacking among primary care providers. As such, these types of healthy behaviors should be emphasized in healthcare education, financially incentivized by third party payers, and supported by policies that make healthy decisions easy to make and accessible to all.
Health professionals who provide complementary and integrative care are well suited to empower and assist patients with recommendations for a healthy diet, exercise, stress reduction and community connections. Psychological self-care practices historically tied to integrative care disciplines, including mindfulness meditation and yoga, can have a positive effect on the inflammatory process and immune function, as well as chronic pain.15,16,17 Further, longer and more frequent clinical encounters typical of chiropractic doctors, doctors of Chinese medicine and massage therapists often provide greater opportunity to learn more about the health habits of their patients and guide them to a higher level of wellness. Once the integrative practitioner has established a relationship with the patient, the clinician can support salutogenesis while at the same time addressing the problem or disease that first caused the patient to seek care.

Collaboration from a Cross-Sector Team

Healthcare providers can play an important role in assisting an individual on their journey toward optimal wellbeing. However, we believe that no provider – regardless of their discipline – can accomplish this alone. Health creation often requires a team approach and, most importantly, coordination among a cross section of health professionals. Together with the patient, integrative care providers create a milieu that supports the multi-faceted needs of an individual. The very nature of integration creates partnerships across sectors of society that intersect as social determinants of health, ultimately resulting in a more effective, sustainable healthcare system. Importantly, greater integration of a range of healthcare providers in the broader context of social supports may be a powerful tool for addressing ethnic and racial disparities that often affect patients from communities of color, particularly when persistent challenges with poverty, food and housing insecurity threaten health.

One innovative and highly collaborative approach to take advantage of a cross-sector team is the Whole Health Initiative, launched by the Veterans Health Administration. The VA’s Whole Health initiative, a team of professionals works with the patient to develop a personalized health plan focused around “what matters to you, not what is the matter with you.”18 It is based on a Circle of Health concept that includes conventional medical as well as complementary and integrative approaches, partnering to address both prevention and treatment.19

An emphasis on whole person health is also unfolding in a new strategic vision within the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH). This federal agency notes the importance of integrating knowledge across disciplines to improve the health of the whole person, and using a transdisciplinary approach to care that transcends traditional boundaries in medicine. Efforts like these amplify the longstanding philosophy of integrative healthcare practitioners, and scale integrative approaches to health creation and disease management to truly transform our healthcare system.

“I see health as an individual living at their most vibrant state, considering who they, where they are in their life cycle, and considering any comorbidities they might have.”

— Barbara Gosse

(see illustration)
Recommendations and a Call to Action

At Northwestern Health Sciences University, we believe that health creation requires a shift in thinking by health professionals and the patients they serve. Integrative models that leverage cross-sector collaboration to prioritize salutogenesis are needed to address the economic and public health imperative of a sick healthcare system. We suggest the following actions to better align around health creation:

**Reimagine healthcare priorities**
- Allocate greater public health resources to support health creation, particularly in communities of color
- Dedicate healthcare professional curricula to include competencies about salutogenesis, health creation, and collaborative integrative care
- Create opportunity for interprofessional education, to cross-train a range of healthcare disciplines around the central tenets of whole person health

**Revise healthcare communication and marketing**
- Promote public health messaging that emphasizes patient empowerment, resilience, and wellbeing regardless of state of health or disease
- Emphasize movement, healthy foods, sleep, and stress management as foundational to good health at each healthcare encounter
- Engage a more comprehensive strategy of healthcare delivery, by including complementary and integrative practitioners in public and private health systems and insurance plans

**Reorient healthcare systems to prioritize health creation**
- Use quality of life and wellbeing outcomes to measure system performance
- Reimburse any willing provider to deliver health coaching and lifestyle counseling
- Incentivize care coordination and cross-sector engagement to decrease health disparities

A paradigm shift away from disease care and toward health creation presents providers and the communities they serve with an opportunity. Aligning resources around salutogenesis, emphasizing the fundamentals of health promotion, and enhancing cross-sector collaboration can improve the public’s health and better meet the needs of communities who may have been previously disenfranchised by the healthcare system. Northwestern Health Sciences University is a committed partner in health creation for everyone.

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