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A Nation at Risk

by Raymond Francis

"Never doubt the power of small groups to change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Margaret Mead, Anthropologist
1901 – 1978

The future of our nation as a world leader is at risk. This threat comes not from hostile countries or from organized terrorists; it comes from us. By making uninformed choices regarding our health, both our physical and mental health is deteriorating. A sick and mentally incompetent America cannot continue to supply the kind of political, economic, and technological world leadership that has been such a boon to mankind for more than half a century. The solution to this problem is to teach people how to maintain health. Health education, using cutting-edge technology, will put the responsibility for health where it belongs—with the individual.

Pick a city, and it is almost a sure bet that the area's largest private employer is the hospitals, medical centers, doctors, and diagnostic laboratories that serve that city. The U.S. spends many times more on health care than it does for defense or education. Medical costs are a financial drain for much of the U.S. private sector, including enormous unfunded liabilities for retiree health plans. All of the money spent on health care represents money that will not go into plant modernization, product engineering, research, or economic growth.

How sick is the American population? More than three out of four Americans have a diagnosable chronic disease according to a study in the April 1999 *Effective Clinical Practice*. We are not a healthy population and our health continues to deteriorate with each passing year.

According to the *State of the World 2000* report from the Worldwatch Institute, the world is in the midst of a nutrition crisis. In the developed countries, 1.2 billion people, including most Americans, are now "starving" and undernourished because they are overfed with too much of the wrong foods. (Ironically, this number equals the number of people who are starving because they are underfed.) This largely unrecognized crisis is becoming increasingly acute with the boom in unhealthy eating triggered by affluence. According to Worldwatch, fatty and sugary "foods" have replaced fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods in the diets of millions, to the point where 20 percent of the "vegetables" consumed by the average American consists of health damaging french fries and potato chips. This affluent diet results in chronic vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and it is the root cause of our epidemic of chronic disease and obesity.

The obesity epidemic is a graphic indicator of our decline in health. Obesity rates among U.S. adults have been skyrocketing since the late 1970s. Almost two out of three American adults now meet the scientific standards for being overweight or obese. These people are at increased risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, depression, and many other diseases. An estimated 1,200 people per day die from weight-related diseases. This adds up to over 400,000 people per year, and the health care cost of all this extra weight is estimated at \$117 billion annually. Even children are not immune to the obesity epidemic and its health effects. From 1960 to 2000, obesity among U.S. children aged 6 to 10 increased by 54 percent. Obesity is a risk factor for diabetes and adult diabetes is now being diagnosed in children as young as age three. In fact, almost half of all newly diagnosed cases of "adult" diabetes are in

children. Yet, another indicator of our declining health is reflected in our epidemic of asthma. Americans with asthma jumped 61 percent between 1982 and 1994. Mortality from asthma increased 45 percent between 1985 and 1995, and the death rate is now increasing at 6 percent per year. Asthma is now the leading cause of school absenteeism. Medical treatment for asthma now costs in excess of \$6 billion per year. Still another indicator is childhood cancer; it is increasing every year, and more children now die of cancer than any other disease.

The economic effects of this epidemic are staggering. A 1998 study by the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) forecasted that our national health care costs would double by 2007. The research projected that health care costs would likely exceed \$2 trillion by 2007, rising from \$1 trillion in 1996. They are now \$1.5 trillion. HCFA also projected that health care spending would probably account for 17 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) by 2011, up from 12 percent in 1990. This means national health care spending is predicted to grow faster than the GDP. And in fact health care spending increased 6.9 percent from 1999 to 2000 to \$1.3 trillion, while GDP increased only 6.5 percent. This was the third year in a row of accelerating growth in health spending. Prescription drug costs went up 17.3 percent in 2000, the sixth consecutive year of double-digit growth.

As health care costs continue to escalate, the transference of such a large amount of the nation's economic resources from productive activity to the treatment of disease is bound to have a negative impact on our standard of living. According to a 2001 report by the Medicare Board of Trustees, "Medicare spending is expected to exceed the costs of Social Security." Medicare spending will more than double over the next ten years, and the three big entitlements—Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid—will together amount to 75 percent of the federal budget in 2030. The promised benefits under Social Security and Medicare are projected to exceed scheduled income by \$465 trillion over the next 75 years. Naturally this cannot be allowed to happen, as this amount of wealth transference from younger workers is probably not politically possible. Either way the results will be unpleasant.

Even without these projected increases in cost, our nation now spends more on health, in total and per person, than any nation in the world. Yet according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. ranks 37th in overall health quality. WHO measured how long people live in good health, not just how long they live. It should serve as a wake-up call for all Americans when a country like Oman spends only \$334 per person per year on health and ranks 8th in the world, while the U.S. spends more than ten times that much and we are 37th.

Not only is our physical health suffering, but our mental health is also in decline. The single most complex entity in the known universe is the human brain. This complex organ has a long list of requirements that must be met every day in order to first construct and then to maintain it at optimal levels. Unfortunately, the American diet, along with our immersion in a sea of neurotoxic chemicals, has seriously compromised this amazingly complex triumph of nature. The foods we eat are so deficient they threaten the physical structure of the brain, while toxins scramble the brain's communications. This has altered the state of our minds with startling results. For example:

- Our ability to think and reason is in a downward trend.
- School achievement tests have had to be progressively "dumbed down."
- Since World War II, the incidence of depression has skyrocketed.
- One out of four adults now experiences a mental health crisis in any given year.
- One of ten children experiences major depression before the age of fifteen.
- One out of five children suffers from some kind of behavioral problem.
- ADD is becoming one of our nation's most common health problems.
- Expenditures for antidepressants now exceed \$7 billion per year.
- Substance abuse is growing every year.
- From 1950 to 1993, childhood homicide rates have tripled.

- Our childhood homicide rate is now five times higher than the rest of the world combined.
- Childhood suicide rates have quadrupled in the same period.
- Fear of violence in the workplace is increasing.
- Murder has become a leading cause of death in the workplace.
- We have the worst crime rate in the industrialized world.

Each of these trends is getting progressively worse, and they will continue to get worse until we teach people how to properly build and care for the human brain.

All of these negative effects on our health are beginning to be recognized as resulting from our lifestyles. A 1998 study by the Gallup Organization released a report card on the nation's health and found that Americans are overweight, stressed out, and caught up in bad and dangerous habits. George Gallup, Jr., co-chairman of the Gallup Organization, said, "...people have not done their share to stay healthy because they are indulging in habits that are self-destructive."

How can we turn this crisis around? Dr. Joseph Scherger, Chairman of the Department of Family Medicine at the University of California Irvine, had this to say, "...lifestyle factors now loom as the leading cause of death. Promoting a healthy lifestyle must now become a principal focus..." Our modern high-tech society has fundamentally changed the parameters required for healthy life. In a very short period of time, we have completely changed our diets, environment, and behavior, and we are now experiencing the results. To address these problems, we must promote lifestyle changes and teach people how to mitigate these fundamental changes in diet, environment, and behavior. As a practical matter, this can only be done through meaningful health education for children. But such education is lacking. Commercial interests, promoting their unhealthy products, taint our current health education programs, including the government's food pyramid. These programs fail to supply the education necessary to address our health problems, and this failure is putting America's health and economic prosperity at risk. We must create a new kind of educational program to teach our children the basic principles of good health.

Fortunately, the technology exists to give every schoolchild an understanding of health that is fundamental, powerful, enabling, and of proven effectiveness. Such a program would begin to produce positive results almost immediately, and the benefits would increase with time as more people became educated and as food suppliers responded with healthier products. With tens of millions making better health choices daily, the future health of our nation is assured. Such an effort has the potential to virtually eliminate our epidemic of chronic and degenerative disease. Not only will the individual benefit with a higher quality of life, but society will benefit as people become more intelligent and productive, and as health care costs are reallocated to more productive investments.

If America is to survive and prosper in the coming decades, we cannot continue to allow our health to deteriorate. We must reverse this epidemic of chronic disease. But that will not happen by continuing to make the same poor choices and expecting different results. Health-e-America Foundation knows how to end this epidemic, but we need your help. We need the funds to hire the people to make this a reality. We owe it to our children and those who come after them to provide a better, disease-free world. All it takes is education, and that takes money. Here is your chance to make a difference, a difference that needs to be made, and perhaps one of the biggest ever.

Won't you please help us and send your tax-deductible donation to Health-e-America Foundation at P.O. Box 150578, San Rafael, CA 94915.
Thank you and God bless you!

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