

Start with a smaller burger (11/3/09)

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Washington Post: Even if health reform is enacted this year it will take years to implement. What are some things that can be done immediately to improve the health of the nation?

What can be done to improve the health of the nation immediately? Meaning the next year or two or three? Three points: (1) Individuals can do many things to improve health in a short time-span; (2) Government has very few tools to improve health in a hurry; and (3) There is a short-term/long-term problem in the current Congressional bills.

A determined individual can do much to improve his or her health fairly rapidly: eat less food, eat healthier food, get more exercise, stop smoking, drive more carefully, avoid drugs, enjoy more leisure, have checkups and follow your doctor's advice. "Personal responsibility" sounds trite, but it's the surest way to improve health. The improvements can start this afternoon, without an act of Congress or the president's signature. You know more about what you're doing wrong better than anyone else ever will.

Government can do things that improve health - drastically sometimes - but generally with long time-lags. A few public-sector actions might yield rapid, albeit modest, improvements: Remove legal prohibitions preventing doctors, hospitals and other providers from coordinating care. Require more transparency from insurers and providers so patients can make better choices. Enact tort reform, thereby improving doctor-patient relationships. Above all, do a better job of managing the programs we already have; 10 to 12 million Americans are already eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP today but go uninsured because they don't make it through the programs' red-tape. Public-option enthusiasts ought to ponder that those 10 to 12 million comprise 20 to 25 percent of America's uninsured.

Finally, since we're talking about timing, I'll mention a related concern. As this week's question implies, the current bills provide relatively few tangible benefits until four or five years after passage. Yet huge taxes and fees begin to bear down immediately, especially on small business owners and employees. Our economy is fragile, and it's deeply problematic to ask people and businesses to bear heavy new assessments in exchange for the promise of improvements (many of them questionable) years down the road. The effects will mean higher unemployment and lower income (especially for low-wage workers) and such losses affect workers' health as well as their wealth.