

Good Behavior



Center for Advancing Health

Not Just Nice - Necessary

When I turned 50, my doctor scheduled me for my first routine screening colonoscopy. So I was surprised to wake up from the procedure to find that part of my colon and I would soon be going our separate ways.

The process through which that separation eventually took place made me think hard about the decisions we make about our care - in particular, how advances in health care simultaneously *promise* better outcomes while *demanding* more from us.

Think of it: Medical advances have led to shorter hospital stays. We come home quicker but sicker and find ourselves facing a bewildering array of symptoms, drugs, devices and rehabilitation activities that previously were managed by professionals. More sophisticated medical treatments make it possible to live long and fulfilling lives with diseases that previously would have killed or disabled us - but only if we stick to complex drug and diet regimens and permanently change long-held habits.

Medical advances, however brilliant, come at a price that has gone largely unrecognized: the shifting of responsibility from health professionals to patients. Without our active, informed participation, all that beautiful science, all those marvelous drugs and devices will fall far short of achieving their potential.

Our participation in our health care is no longer just nice. It is now necessary if we are to benefit from it.

Unfortunately, we often don't understand just how much is at stake. While we claim to value choice, most of us still pick a doctor based on the advice of a neighbor or friend. Then, we defer to that doctor about our treatments. We maintain a casual approach to medication adherence and worry about - but ultimately ignore - diet and activity prescriptions necessary to successfully manage chronic conditions. Despite an explosion of health information and tools and programs available everywhere, to date, the

truth is that *most of us still do not take the actions upon which our well-being depends.*

However, it is far from common practice for providers of care, physicians and facilities to welcome and facilitate active engagement of patients and families.

I began by saying I awoke to find that part of my colon and I would soon be going our separate ways. What I should have said is that I awoke to my doctor's recommendation that this should happen, which triggered a cascade of decisions that I had to make that even I - with my nice PhD, my career working in health policy, and my unfortunately extensive experience with the diagnosis and treatment of two previous cancers - found daunting. I was constantly surprised by what I was expected to know and to do for myself in order to get safe, decent care.

I believe that our responsibilities for our care will increase considerably in the coming five years. And I fear that regardless of how much more evidence-based and affordable "the system" becomes, without our active, informed participation, we will not realize hoped-for gains in our own health and health of the nation.

We will know that our critical role is taken seriously when the work of health care providers and institutions is organized so that we can do ours -- 24 hours a day, seven days a week -- as we make lunch for our kids, prepare for our colonoscopies, help our mom coordinate our disabled dad's army of care providers, infuse our chemotherapy drugs, and keep tight control of our blood glucose by eating better, taking our meds and trying find time to walk around the block.

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From the Health Behavior News Service

The Health Behavior News Service regularly distributes stories summarizing new research on health behavior issues. These stories can be found online at <http://www.cfah.org/hbns/current.cfm>

August News Stories:

- **LIMITED HEALTH LITERACY PRESENTS HURDLES TO DECENT CARE** People who struggle with poor reading and math skills experience problems understanding instructions from health care providers and adhering to treatment, according to a new research review.
- **U.S. DRIVERS TAKE WHEEL AFTER BINGE DRINKING IN BARS, CLUBS** More than one in 10 people who binge drinks gets behind the wheel of a car during or just after their binge. Of those, more than half were served their liquor in a bar, restaurant or club.
- **DRINKERS MORE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE THAN ABSTAINERS** Drinkers aren't just bending their elbows: according to a new study, the more alcohol people drink, the more likely they might be to exercise.
- **MISTRUST OF HEALTH CARE SYSTEM LEADS PATIENTS TO POSTPONE TREATMENT** Mistrust among patients, providers and insurers could harm patients' health and raise overall health care costs, reports a new study.
- **MANY DOCTORS SHOWN TO HAVE SUBCONSCIOUS RACIAL ATTITUDES** A new U.S. study has found that doctors, like the majority of people who responded, prefer whites to blacks subconsciously, which potentially can affect their ability to provide equal health care to their minority patients.
- **LIKE THEIR LIVES, WOMEN'S EXERCISE PASSES THROUGH PHASES** Milestones such as marriage and motherhood -- or retirement and widowhood -- can affect the amount of exercise women get, according to a large new study from Australia.
- **TEENS HAVE LESS SEX AFTER MIDDLE-SCHOOL PROGRAM** A new program that urges middle-school students to figure out their values regarding sex appears to reduce the likelihood that they'll engage in early sexual activity, a study finds.

CFAH CENTER FOR
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Evidence. Engagement. Equity.

Since its founding in 1992, The Center for Advancing Health (CFAH) has worked to translate complex scientific evidence into information, policies and programs that will ensure that each person can make good decisions about their health and interact effectively with their health care providers. CFAH is an independent, non-profit organization that is supported by a number of philanthropic organizations (principally the Annenberg Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and individuals. Good Behavior is a monthly series, written by the Center's president, Jessie Gruman, PhD, and intended for health policy makers. The publication offers Dr. Gruman's perspective on emerging health care issues, and provides insight based on evidence about how best to address them. For more information, visit us online at www.cfah.org