



September 25, 2010 – Grand Rapids, MI

## Frontier Days

Today's message is about preventive healthcare. Someone sent me an article saying that one potential solution to the unknown future of healthcare is to take better care of ourselves now and maybe, just maybe, we won't need as much healthcare. The net effect is that preventive care reduces the healthcare costs for everyone. I'm going to illustrate the point by sharing some news and by updating a story I told you earlier.

### The Coach

If you follow college football at all, you know that Michigan State beat Notre Dame last week on a fake field goal in overtime. Great play and the Spartans win. But within an hour of the victory, MSU coach Mark Dantonio was on his way to the hospital with a heart attack. He's only 54 and fairly fit, unlike most 54-year-old men in America today. The cardiologists did an angioplasty, opened the artery, put in a stent, and he was released a couple of days later. The quick action prevented significant damage to his heart. The key word is significant; it doesn't mean there was no damage, but by all accounts, he was lucky.

Listen to what his first words were to one of his coaches according to newspaper accounts: "I just don't feel well." Here we go again—by far, that's the most common phrase uttered by people who have heart attacks. Later, he told the training staff he had pressure in his chest. There was no playing around when he told his wife, Becky—he was on his way to the hospital. Men who confide only in men too often end up dead. He told the right person, and he'll live to coach another day.

Many writers and other coaches talked about how coaching is a stressful job and that the pressure can lead to problems like heart attacks. Sorry, but they're wrong. That heart disease was there whether he coached or not. Maybe the release of hormones during the game contributed to the onset, but remember—they opened an artery and put in a stent. That heart attack was going to happen sooner or later. As for stress, who doesn't have it? I'm sure you make tough decisions under stress all the time—maybe not on TV with millions watching, but stress is stress. Your body doesn't know the difference.

Is there something he could have done differently? Maybe.

### The Runner

In a message a couple of weeks ago, I talked about an email conversation with a reader about getting a stress test. He took the test and passed it with flying colors; his doctor told him he was in the top 5% fitness level for men in his age group. He has the green light to run without reservation. We've developed a plan for him to improve his running, and I have no doubt he will do what it takes to run free again.

In his case, the reason he was having difficulties getting going was related to his heart and cardiovascular system but not because of atherosclerosis—it was because he hadn't really run in 30 years. No matter how long ago it was, he was a very good runner who remembered the way it used to feel. That's the operative phrase this time: used to feel. His problem was 30 years of no training. Within six months of consistent running, he'll be a lot closer to what he remembers. It's just going to take time.

In his case, it may seem like the stress test was a waste of money. Here's the thing: how would we know unless he had the test? That information will go a long way. I can honestly say that he is one of the few men over 60 who

didn't have significant cardiovascular disease when tested. Getting that information is important because it means that those men who have cardiovascular problems can do something about them before they have a heart attack.

## The Bottom Line

I think that some people, especially men, act like we still live in frontier days when people often didn't see the doctor until the problem was obvious. No, we're tough guys and we have gut it out. We don't even think about seeing a doctor until we're at death's door. But the means to diagnose disease has progressed exponentially; the advantage we have today is that we might be able to prevent serious disease and death if we work with our doctors.

That, of course, means you first must have a doctor. I understand not everyone has all the healthcare coverage they need or would like, but especially when it comes to your heart, what is your life worth? At least see the doctor—they understand that healthcare is expensive because they deal with it every day. Together you can work out a plan to get the best care available for the budget you have. Improving your health is never a one-shot deal anyway; it's always a work in progress.

Frontier days are over, and prevention is a whole lot better than treatment and often cheaper as well. Get off it and get started—schedule a visit with your doctor.

What are you prepared to do today?

*Dr. Chet*

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