



December 26, 2011 – Grand Rapids, MI

Debate: Your Answers

The question has been asked, and you've answered in large numbers! I read every response to my question:

Why do you think the focus of physicians is geared toward only treatment and rarely prevention?

Your answers fell into several categories, and I counted your responses in each category. Some of you gave more than one answer, so I counted them in more than one category. I'm going to give you the answers in order of prevalence. I'll also provide quotes from some of your answers. I wish I could do them all, but your reading time may be limited and there are only so many electrons available. Just remember that these are not my opinions—they're yours. So here we go.

Money

Without question, this was the number one answer with over 55% citing money as the answer. However, the reasons you gave for that varied.

"I always thought it was because there wouldn't be much of a return business or continual flow of patients if people were taught prevention rather than cure."

That expresses what most of you thought: there's just no money in prevention for the physicians in the current system.

"I was instructed to stop teaching patients how to care for themselves as it was not a good use of my time. That's what the meds are for."

That was a quote from a nurse who worked in a cardiologist's office. More than one of you in the healthcare field expressed similar sentiments, but it's still shocking to see it blatantly spelled out. In a world where time is money, prevention takes time and would cost the practice money.

Us

The second-ranking answer was that we are to blame. That was my answer as well, but these were written before I gave my reasons. Many of you feel we don't do enough to prevent ourselves from getting sick, and doctors agree.

"Most patients are looking for the quick fix, so they're happy if they get a prescription or easy treatment."

When people go to the doctor, they're generally there because they don't feel good—but they expect immediate results. When they're told to quit smoking or lose weight, they don't do it. Instead of going for preventive testing, they go when they're sick. Over and over, they demonstrate with their behavior that they want treatment, not prevention.

Insurance Companies

This was a tie with the next reason. Many of you felt that while the insurance companies will pay for treatment, they won't pay for prevention—or at least not enough for prevention. Maybe the plan pays for one consultation with a nurse or nutritionist for weight loss, or two consultations with a nutritionist for diabetes education. That's just not enough contact time with knowledgeable professionals to really learn anything. I think the next quote really sums up the problem.

“A doctor's job is to treat sick people. If there are no sick people, they have no job. We need a different group of people to help people keep from getting sick, but who will pay them?”

Pharmaceutical Companies

Many people questioned the motives of the pharmaceutical industry. They believe that the profit motive guides them, and the lure of revenue from new treatments is just too great—there's no profit in prevention. I thought this quote raises a good question.

“I always wonder about those who are in the drug industries. When they get sick, what will they choose? Drugs or more natural treatments and prevention?”

The point our society hasn't reached yet is finding a way to make prevention lucrative. When someone figures that out, then we'll see action, and I'm all for that.

Rules

Much of our current system is based on a schedule that doctors don't like but must conform to: 15 minutes per patient. They're forced to see that many patients in a day by HMO guidelines and to keep the business on track—and remember that a medical practice isn't a charitable endeavor, it's a business just like mine or yours. You can't keep the business going if you don't make a profit, and then the whole staff is on the streets.

“Many doctors practice as they do because they can read test results and prescribe a pill in 15 minutes, but teaching prevention would take much longer. Under the time constraints doctors currently face, prevention is next to impossible.”

It's frustrating for doctors who would rather practice more thoughtfully and for patients who feel rushed and unheard, but that's how the system works right now.

Training

Some people cited training as the primary reason: physicians are trained to diagnose and treat. That is the pattern taught in medical schools. In effect, they're paid to fix problems, not prevent them.

“I guess I may be one of the lucky ones. Our family doctor of more than thirty years looks at the whole person.”

A few responses said that their physicians did practice preventive medicine, whether it was regular check-ups, testing on a schedule, or spending time listening to patients. They lucked out. I would add our family to that lucky group; I've talked about Dr. Pam many times, but she certainly fits that mold and makes me feel like one of the lucky ones.

Wednesday I'll give you a perspective from a physician who didn't really like the question. It's enlightening so don't miss it.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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