

# Editor's Note

This issue of the Harvard Health Policy Review addresses an ever-pressing concern: the role that prevention plays in public health. Investments in prevention are appealing in theory, but nonetheless they have proved difficult to implement. In the pages that follow, we explore why such difficulties have arisen and how they may be surmounted.

The Features Section exposes and examines an array of rationales for public investments in preventive medicine. Woolf frames the debate in terms of national economic solvency, arguing that spiraling medical costs are potentially so devastating to the American economy that our entire health care system must be reordered around prevention. Shiell and McIntosh, however, caution that preventive efforts do not always save money; they argue that most interventions lie in a murky territory where tradeoffs between costs and care must be made. As Corso reveals, economic arguments interact with social factors in determining preferences for investment, as individuals do not form judgments about prevention versus treatment based on costs and benefits alone.

The In Focus Section moves our discussion of prevention from the abstract to the concrete by examining who should lead interventions and when. Latts and colleagues argue that commercial health insurance companies are increasingly effective agents of health promotion because of their well-developed infrastructures. Fitzner and colleagues offer a case study in provider-directed interventions, showing how a physician-led campaign resulted in significant improvements in colorectal cancer screening rates. Clark and colleagues reveal that individuals outside the health care sector can also play important roles in prevention; they document how educational sessions led by professional soccer players improved understanding of HIV/AIDS among Zimbabwean youth. That article prompts questions about the timing of prevention, and Misra explores this issue in depth. In her examination of racial disparities in perinatal health, she suggests that preventing adverse outcomes among infants may require intervention years before conception.

The International Section places preventive interventions in regional perspective by exposing the different issues that policymakers in the Americas and India, respectively, are facing. Andrus and colleagues describe the successful vaccination campaign that led to the eradication of rubella from the Americas, and they offer a general framework applicable to other regions in need of improved vaccination uptake. Apablaza and colleagues focus specifically on the Chilean experience, arguing that a reformist political climate offers the possibility for reorienting incentives for health care providers towards preventive medicine. Our articles on India examine possible responses to rise of HIV/AIDS in that nation. Stones and Pallikadavath warn that the virus is on the verge of transmission from India's marginal to mainstream populations, and Sivaram and colleagues urge policymakers to direct their interventions to male social networks.

The Health Highlights section addresses the political and cultural contexts for phenomena that are all too often discussed in terms of individual agency—obesity and suicidality. In his piece on the American obesity epidemic, Katz reminds readers that since the tendency to consume available food is a natural bodily reaction, systematic change must be undertaken to alter the obesigenic environment and our responses to it. Ammerman and colleagues focus on the rise of youth obesity, offering specific recommendations to reduce children's exposure to unhealthy foods. In our final article, Bhugra shows that social factors also impact individual decisions regarding suicidality; he analyzes how rates of attempted and completed suicide among men and women vary across cultures.

Prevention is generally rationalized using economic arguments, but nonetheless it often falters in the realm of political economy. It is my hope that the policy recommendations that follow prove as motivating as they are engrossing.

Sincerely,  
Alexandra Harwin