



Good habits add years to life span

LAST week was remarkable for health and science news. A phenomenal scientific advancement was announced relating to the very make-up of humans. Shocking safety issues about America's health care system also were announced.

On the up-side, the International Human Genome Project presented findings that the first human chromosome is now completely mapped. This means that it is only a matter of time until there will be advances in medicine for conditions previously thought to be incurable.

Also, the Journal of the American Medical Association published an entire issue devoted to cardiovascular disease. Many of the articles relate to the increased importance of lowering individual risk factors through increasing good health habits such as not smoking, exercising regularly, eating a good diet, and maintaining a healthy body weight. These studies estimate an increased life expectancy due to these good habits to be between 5.8 years and 9.5 years.

On a more sobering view, Dr. Kenneth Shine, president of the Institute of Medicine, presented the report "To Err is Human."

This startling report reviews numerous studies about our health care system and estimates that

between 44,000 and 98,000 patients hospitalized in America die each year due to medical mistakes. That's more deaths per year from medical mistakes than from highway accidents, breast cancer, or AIDS.

THE report was not written by a group of disgruntled physicians. IOM, part of National Academy of Sciences, is a private, nonprofit institution directed by a congressional charter to provide health policy advice. "To Err is Human" is the first report of a series to help develop a strategy for improving America's health care.

Part of the strategy includes encouraging consumers, health professionals, and accreditation groups to become involved. The report indicates pressure from all of these groups is what is necessary to improve patient safety and for real change to occur.

Although the report indicates erring is human, it encourages consumers to be proactive in their own health care. Here are our nine suggestions.

1) Encourage healthful behaviors in children. Good habits learned early can provide years of better quality life.

2) Take an active role in maintaining your health. Provide your health professionals with a list of all nutritional supplements, herbal

products, and drugs you are taking AND ask your pharmacist about potential problems.

3) Get regular checkups to catch any medical problems before they become too advanced to be treated easily.

4) Exercise regularly (at least 30 minutes a day). Don't wait to see if you have enough time and energy at day's end.

5) Eat a wide variety of wholesome foods in moderation.

6) Drink sensibly. Too much alcohol is a strong liver toxin.

7) Encourage hospitals to increase staffing of well-trained health professionals, rather than with less expensive and less trained individuals.

8) If hospitalized, be assertive. This includes having family or a friend with you at all times. That individual can be your voice. This is not the time to be timid.

9) In the hospital, drink adequate fluids before you get thirsty. Lack of hydration can cause a fever and trigger serious lean body wasting.

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