

Prescription for a Healthy Nation: A New Approach to Improving Our Lives by Fixing Our Everyday World, Tom Farley, M.D. and Deborah A. Cohen, M.D. Beacon Press, Boston, 2005, 282 pages.

“Prescription for a Health Nation” is a clearly written well argued volume that proposes an approach to the health problems we face in the America through a public health-public policy approach to health care. Posing the question why as a nation do we spend so much on health care but rank among the sickest people in the industrialized world, the authors assert that we took the wrong turn when as illustrated by the Greek myth of the daughter’s of *Asclepius*, we favored *Panacea* (cures) over *Hygeia* (cleanliness). They review the impact of the public health victories of the 18th and 19th century and identify the major causes of death in America as today: smoking, diet and physical inactivity, alcohol, microbes, toxins, motor vehicle accidents firearms, unsafe sexual behavior and illicit drugs. Analyzing curves representing the distribution of adverse health related behavior to a percentage of the population, they cite the work of the British epidemiologist, Geoffrey Rose, to illustrate that by focusing on shifting the peak of the curve rather than focusing on eliminating that part of the tail corresponding to excessive behavior, the greatest benefit for the greatest numbers of individuals in the population can be realized. One of the examples that the authors explore to illustrate this point is cholesterol. Rather than focusing exclusively on the high end of the curve, if our efforts are on lowering the cholesterol of the normal risk individuals, a greater reduction in the absolute number of heart attack related deaths will be realized. This concept of “curve shifting”, as it relates to improving the health in America, is the focus of the book. The authors review the current concepts in behavioral psychology as it impacts on health related behavior. In successive chapters they treat each of the major causes of death: injuries, consumption (diet and lack of physical activity), tobacco, alcohol and unsafe sexual practices, exploring the most effective approaches to favorably modifying behavior or the environment to improve our health. A key concept that emerges is that modifying the environment is sometimes more effective than trying to change individual behavior. A most interesting chapter on improving motor vehicle design as a means of decreasing the mortality rates associated with motor vehicle accidents is more effective than trying to change driver behavior and highlights the political realities improving health. In the 1950s the prevailing wisdom was that automobile accident fatalities were caused primarily by driver error. The epidemiologic studies of William Haddon, M.D., M.P.H., revealed the major causes of death were related to flaws in the design of the vehicles such as interior design and steering wheels.. These studies got the attention of important senators and led to meaningful legislation that forced improvements in automobile design. Industry will always favor its commercial interests over those of consumers and the importance of citizen involvement will be necessary to affect the changes necessary to improve the health of our nation. The book is well referenced with foot notes that support the facts cited. Physicians will read this book with profit for its broad approach to improving the health of their patients. The book will be of interest to all who wish to think seriously about the health of our nation.

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