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Patient-centered primary care can solve nation's dilemma

Boise has some of the most dedicated health care providers in the nation, but we've been far from immune to the nation's escalating health care crisis. Health care spending is now more than 17 percent of GDP, while obesity and chronic illness, like diabetes, are reaching alarming rates, even in our own state.

Based on a body-mass index assessment that was conducted by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare for the 2007/2008 school year, 12.8 percent of Idaho third-graders are overweight and an additional 15.2 percent are at risk of becoming overweight based on their BMI-for-age.

An overhaul of America's health care system couldn't come at a more critical time, not only because of the imperative to improve our citizens' health, but because our local economy and our health care system are inextricably linked.

Some important steps are being considered to jump-start the health care system in America - electronic medical records, increased training of more primary care physicians, and an enhanced focus on wellness and prevention - all of which will help support a longer-term permanent fix of our health care system.

At the heart of many health care reform discussions is a concept called patient-centered primary care, which gives people greater access to a primary care physician who can look at their comprehensive needs, including wellness, prevention and better disease management. Studies show that when a person has a primary care doctor as their usual source of care, their health care costs are one-third less and they have a 19 percent lower mortality rate.

Doctors at St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center in Hailey are among the growing number of physicians trying to take health care reform into their own hands through patient-centered primary care. This new approach is being touted as a cornerstone of the Obama administration's plans to fix the health care system.

Physicians and patients at the St. Luke's Wood River Medical Center are finding considerable improvements in patient satisfaction by significantly improving the same-day access to their personal physician through the implementation of the patient-centered medical home.

Doctors such as these are seeing fewer patients, spending more time with each, investing in electronic medical records to improve efficiency and even making the occasional online house call as part of a national pilot program to encourage this form of care.

This care model is particularly effective when dealing with patients who have chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, cardiovascular issues and depression, which account for some 80 percent of our nation's health care

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expenditures. When managed consistently over time by a primary care physician, these patients will have better health, lower medical costs and fewer hospitalizations.

Getting people re-engaged through primary care with a personal physician will bring a savings of \$120 billion a year. Our country needs to take advantage of smarter technology in order to create networks of connected information that lead to better care with fewer mistakes, predict and prevent diseases, and help consumers navigate the increasingly complicated health care system.

This, coupled with a new focus on the patient-centered medical home, can help us redefine how health care is delivered at home and across the nation.

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