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Daniel Lee

Health-care reform gets into some weighty issues

Obesity made big news again last week.

The Indianapolis Star carried a story Thursday on a study in the New England Journal of Medicine that found that increases in obesity are offsetting health gains from reductions in smoking.

It's a reminder that -- during this intense time of debate in Congress over health-care reform -- it's perhaps a good time to talk about our own collective health as Americans.

The rise in obesity has been gradual but dramatic. "As Americans, we don't realize how we look to Europeans, where the rates are much lower," said Dr. Ingrid Mason of Nora Internal Medicine in Indianapolis.

In 1990, no state had an adult obesity rate of 15 percent or greater, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

By 2008, only one state -- Colorado -- had an adult obesity rate of *less than* 20 percent. Indiana's obesity rate was more than 26 percent in 2008.

That rise has been accompanied by a rise in health-care costs. Annual premiums for family coverage have jumped from \$5,791 in 1999 to \$13,375 in 2009, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

"It's amazing the power of just small steps," said James Whitehead, chief executive officer of the American College of Sports Medicine, an Indianapolis-based professional group. Even modest improvements in diet or increased physical activity can make a difference, he said.

White said the group is pushing to get healthy-lifestyle initiatives woven into health-care legislation. He pointed to one measure in the Senate bill that would provide funding for seniors to have their health-care providers work with them to create personal wellness plans.

Mason said she has teachable moments with some patients who are newly diagnosed with chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes. But, she added, "in general, behavior change is one of the most difficult things for anyone to do."

Perhaps it's worth asking: Could a big piece of health reform come from simply living healthier lives?

Shareholder against profits



Dr. Rob Stone is sure getting his money's worth from his five shares (worth almost \$270 as of Friday) of WellPoint stock.

Stone, a Bloomington physician and advocate for a single-payer health system, has become a regular at WellPoint shareholder meetings making statements against for-profit health insurers.

Now, with the nation and Congress divided over health-care reform, Stone has taken a different approach. Last week he hand-delivered to WellPoint headquarters a resolution (co-signed by another advocate shareholder to give him enough shares to make the submission) that asks WellPoint to study the feasibility of returning to being a nonprofit insurer.

In 2001, Anthem made the transition from a mutual insurance company to a stock-traded company. It grew into the current WellPoint, which ranks 32nd on the Fortune 500 list of the nation's largest companies. Stone said no nation has achieved universal coverage using a for-profit insurance model.

Stone said WellPoint could ask securities regulators to disallow the resolution. WellPoint spokeswoman Kristin Binns confirmed that the company received the proposal and is reviewing it.