



By Caryn Sullivan

Health Care: Reform Starts at Home

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I was a college student in the late '70s when word came that my 47-year-old single mother of five had colon cancer. When the shocking news hit, roles reversed and I went into full mom mode. Throughout her battle with cancer, I pleaded with her to try everything in the book to beat the beast. Walk, take vitamins, and change your diet. For the love of God, stop smoking! She resisted the pleas of a young woman whose intuition was that lifestyle choices might make a difference. On a dreary December day in 1981, I got the call; we had lost her.

My sister and I reacted rather differently. She has lived life hard, wearing her wounds on her shoulder. She has favored cigarettes and alcohol over exercise and healthy eating, believing an early demise was inevitable. With the memory of my ailing mother holding a cigarette, I took a different course. I rejected smoking, drank alcohol socially, and focused on diet and exercise, fearing that my life would also end too soon. Neither my sister nor I missed the irony when, at age 44, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was surprised by her honesty, however, when she said, "It should have been me."

Despite Mom's outcome and my own experience, my instincts still tell me that living a healthy lifestyle is the way to go. Even my sister has come around to this view. While proper diet and exercise might not prevent cancer, I believe they were potent allies in my recovery. Eating well and exercising regularly enables us to enjoy life more fully, to feel better when we wake, and to sleep more soundly when we retire at the end of a busy day. Pushing our bodies to work for us, whether walking a mile or running a marathon, is gratifying. My goal is to do things I love – biking, traveling, and boating, to have a working mind and body when we are empty nesters, and to become the grandmother my mom never lived to be.

I have followed the health care debate closely. I find it disturbing that there is scant discussion about the role of individual responsibility in addressing health care concerns. Why are we not talking more about why Americans need so much medical care and what we as individuals can do to address that trend? Where is the discussion about the new era of personal responsibility that our president spoke of last winter? I suspect it is easier to demonize government bureaucracies and private insurance companies than to scrutinize our own lifestyle choices.

Living well is both challenging and simple. Changing costly, unhealthy habits such as smoking and drinking often requires great willpower, resolve, and commitment. My

mother and sister showed me that it is darn hard to quit smoking. Friends who have made multiple trips to treatment centers have demonstrated how difficult it is to escape the grip of alcohol and drug addictions. However, other costly habits are more inconvenient than onerous to break. Helmets protect riders on two wheels from traumatic brain injuries. Condoms help protect against AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Yet people forgo them all the time. Despite compelling evidence that seat belts save lives, some people do not use them. Consequently, we have a law that mandates we buckle up or pay up. If we do not bother to protect our health and safety, we invite government to do so for us.

If it is easier to indulge bad habits than good ones, help abounds. Physicians, nutritionists, libraries, and the Internet offer plentiful resources that explain good fats and bad fats and provide easy-to-follow recipes. Some insurance companies offer incentives to those who frequent health clubs.

If making time for exercise is as difficult for others as it is for me, we might take a page from our children's playbook. Fall sports are gearing up now. Young athletes are spending grueling hours preparing for the upcoming season, running, lunging, throwing, swinging, and kicking. Instead of sitting on the sidelines watching our kids move their bodies, maybe we should go for a walk instead. Otherwise, in our quest to support our kids' fitness, we may unwittingly neglect our own. After decades of being motherless, I am confident children would prefer to have a healthy parent who misses a few soccer games than an inactive one who never misses a game but could die of a heart attack any day.

Decades ago, my college health professor gave us simple advice about how to live a healthy life. Find a sport or activity that you enjoy, she said, and incorporate it into your life. Whenever possible, take the stairs instead of the elevator. If she had known about the tasty treats we will savor this next week, I suspect she would have also advised, "If you must follow State Fair tradition, eat just one Pronto Pup." Making healthy lifestyle choices will not eradicate the complex health care problems in our country; but it can reduce the demand for costly medical services. Moreover, being proactive enables us to participate in the solution to the health care predicament, rather than being passive recipients of government or insurance mandates.