

Economic Arguments in Favour of Health Promotion

The issue: Policy makers need to hear **valid arguments** in favour of disease prevention and health promotion, pitched in economic terms.

The problem: Over simplistic economic arguments such as “health promotion will save the health system money” abound. They mislead people.

The facts: In health promotion, we have the means to increase life expectancy and improve quality of life. This will also reduce need for health care. So health promotion has the *potential* to reduce costs.

But the story is not as simple as this. There are costs associated with health promotion. Protecting everybody against a disease may cost more than treating the few who become ill. Second, the extent to which health promotion saves money depends on reactions in the health care system. Any reduction in the number of patients with one disease allows clinicians to increase the number of patients treated with other diseases. Over time, even though the number of patients coming through the door with a problem might go down, drug, technology and salary costs can drive treatment costs up.

What we can say:

- **Many health promotion programs promote health and save money.** e.g., most childhood vaccination programs are very effective and cost very little compared to the costs of the diseases that they prevent.
- **Other health promotion programs are not effective: they cost money** and they fail to promote health e.g., some types of schools-based drug abuse prevention programs; many media campaigns;
- **Most health promotion programs promote health, but we have to pay for the benefit.** These interventions are effective, but their costs still exceed any subsequent savings in health (i.e., they are not cost saving)
- **Many of health promotion programs ‘buy health’ at prices lower than health care programs.** They are *cost-effective*. In terms of health gain per unit cost, smoking cessation is a better buy than heart surgery. Bicycle helmets are better than neurosurgery. Alcohol counseling is better than liver transplantation.

The way forward: Health promotion and health care interventions need to be evaluated in comparable ways: that is in terms of the costs we must pay for unit increases in health. Each health promotion intervention needs to be evaluated individually: to measure the costs of the program,

the savings that might follow, and the outcomes that it will generate. Economically speaking, it is only possible to decide whether prevention is better than cure on a case-by-case basis.

More Information: See:

Shiell A, McIntosh K. Some economics of health promotion: what we know, don't know, and need to know before deciding how much to spend on promoting the public's health. *Harvard Health Policy Review* 2006; 7: 21-31

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