A New Vision of True Health

By Leana S. Wen, M.D.

First, we need to go back to the basics of what healthcare is supposed to be about: taking care of people and meeting their needs, on their terms, where they are. We need to accelerate the movements to have patients and doctors as shared partners in medical decision-making. We need to make real change to the reimbursement system to help doctors spend more time with patients. Doctors should be reimbursed for time spent caring for and listening to patients, rather than for procedures performed on them. That will reorient our system to providing the right amount of care, not too much care.

Next, we need to change medical education. To drive bright students to areas of greatest societal need, medical school should be made free for those who commit to working with underserved populations and geographies, as well as into the primary care field, which cares for the whole person and not just one organ system. We should increase programs that begin developing students from as early as elementary school to become future health professionals, especially those who come from rural and urban communities, to improve the chances of their staying in their neighborhoods to serve them.

Last, we need to change the conversation from healthcare to overall healthfulness, which will require bold, broad, and innovative solutions. Healthcare is about the care we get from hospitals and medical facilities after we are already ill, but research shows that 60 percent of what determines our longevity depends on where and how we live, work, and play. It depends on attention to our overall emotional well-being. We must understand that a healthy life starts early, and therefore have successful public health interventions such as early childhood education and programs that send nurses into homes to help pregnant women and young mothers.

Let’s ensure that health is part of every conversation about the future of our society. There is no such thing as a non-health sector. If our children are unhealthy, they can’t learn. We need all leaders to consider not only the fiscal impact of every policy but also the health impact. The recent travesty of lead poisoning in Flint, Mich., has demonstrated that government officials and businesses must be held accountable to put public safety ahead of profit and cost cutting. If there is a proposal for new schools, communities need to ask for plans showing how classrooms will be designed to maximize wellness (healthy air quality, plenty of options to move about) and how the school system will require innovative programs to give students access to fresh fruits and vegetables, not just in school hallways but at home, too. That must be seen as being as essential as the need to plan for fire escape routes. Similarly, if there is a proposal for a new city development, then doctors, health professionals, and patients alike must work together to ensure that there are walking and bike paths, and plenty of parks—which improve both physical and mental health. We must invest in physical infrastructure that makes exercise and exposure to nature an integral part of everyday lives so that no one has to put “working out” on her calendar, then be tempted to ignore it.
Person-centered health, exceptional quality of life, and health equity are all within our grasp. To get there, we have our work cut out for us, but the future of our society—and the generations who are not yet born—depends on us to be courageous and to look to do what is possible. All of us must speak up, call out the injustices that we see, and demand a future focused on good health for everyone.