

Ways to improve our local health

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A few weeks ago the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, released the County Health Rankings report for all 50 states, including a ranking for the 132 cities and counties of Virginia. This is the first time that every county in the nation has received such a report.

When you look at the report to see where your home county ranks, you will notice that in Southwest Virginia we rank among the lowest in the state for health outcomes and health factors. There are, however, three much more important, if less obvious, messages in this report.

The first important message is that every county, highly ranked or lowly ranked, has strengths and weaknesses and, most importantly, opportunities for improvement. This report provides every county in the state the information that it needs to identify its greatest health challenges. Then it is up to each county, to us and our neighbors, to decide which of these challenges we want to address and how we want to address them.

The second message is to notice that “access to health care” and “quality of health care” account for only a small part of the overall health factors ranking. We know that access to quality health care, while extremely important, is only one of many factors that impact our health. Education, employment, income, family and social support, community safety, and environmental factors account for a greater part of these health rankings ranking than does access to quality health care. In other words, where a county is ranked is not just the responsibility of the local hospital, or your local health care provider, or your county health department, or, for that matter, your region’s elected leaders, educational system, or business community. It is a responsibility that we all share.

The final and most important message from these rankings is the realization that we can improve our health in Southwest Virginia. If we work together at all levels – family, community, county and region – we can significantly impact our health status. It isn’t as difficult as you might think.

First, we must start in our own families. Make a commitment to eating a healthier diet and to getting more exercise. A total life change is unnecessary. Just take a few small steps at a time.

Play with your kids and read to them. Spend less time watching television and the computer screen. Cut down on snacks and sugary drinks. Drink more water. Get a flu

vaccine each year and the H1N1 vaccine this year. Keep your children in school because staying in school pays off in a healthier, longer life for them.

Encourage work; whether for pay or as a volunteer or in the home, being active and engaged in the productive life of our family and community pays huge health dividends. The importance of education and work to health cannot be overemphasized. And, if you use tobacco, it is a great time to quit. Doing so will eliminate the most important preventable cause of death and illness. It will also save big money.

Second, lead from where you are. Meet with people in your neighborhood, your place of worship, your social organization, your regional health council or where you work to discuss your local community health issues. Bring together elected officials, educators, business leaders, healthcare professionals and begin a discussion about your community's health challenges and what you want to do about them.

Thirdly, support regional and statewide projects that improve health. The Southwest Virginia Health Authority and the Healthy Appalachia Institute are two important bodies with a unique partnership that were created just a few years ago to improve health in our region. Read their recently published "Blueprint for Health Improvement and Health-Enabled Prosperity" and get involved in bringing some of its 20 goals and 49 objectives to fruition. There is a great opportunity to do this at a health summit planned April 8 at the Russell County Conference Center in Lebanon, Va.

You can read the blueprint and register for the health summit at <http://www.healthyappalachia.org>. Finally, be patient but stay engaged, with yourself and with our community and regional efforts.

Real progress is being made, but it also can be slow-going. Our Southwest Virginia health rankings can move but they will not move quickly. Other counties are not standing still and there is a long way to go. Together, we can use the recent report as an opportunity to make a shared commitment to improving Southwest Virginia's health – one family, one community, and one county at a time.

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