

## A Cure for What Ails Us

Oklahoma has cured poverty. For that matter so has America.

That's the good news. But first the bad news: Oklahoma was recently ranked 44<sup>th</sup> in the United Health Foundation's annual health status report.

In their annual report of each state's overall health status, the United Health Foundation ranked Oklahoma 44<sup>th</sup>. It is no secret that Oklahoma is a very ill state. In addition to illustrating the healthcare issues that face our state it cast a false impression of Oklahoma to the rest of the country. Oklahomans have a long history of innovation, entrepreneurship, hard work and friendliness none of which is done justice by the ranking. Everyone involved in healthcare in the state wants to dramatically reverse nearly all of the healthcare indicators the report mentions. Most everyone thinks educating the public about lifestyle choices is the key. We have campaigns or talks of campaigns for all of it. How many "Get out and exercise" campaigns have there been in the past? Countless. Will any of them work? Probably not. Why? Because they're mostly aimed at adults and adults have ingrained habits that are difficult to break. There's a better way and it tackles two diseases: unhealthy lifestyles and poverty.

According to the United Health Foundation, in 2006 Oklahoma ranked 46<sup>th</sup> with respect to the prevalence of smoking, 38<sup>th</sup> with respect to the prevalence of obesity and 43<sup>rd</sup> with respect to physical activity. Many impoverished people tend to live high-risk lifestyles. Smoking, obesity, and lack of exercise are all hallmarks for many of those in poverty. They are by no means exclusive to those in poverty but those living in poverty disproportionately represent such health behaviors. A survey of these three behavioral risk factors by county shows the Southeastern part of Oklahoma to be the most afflicted. This same region of the state also is the highest in terms of those living in poverty and not graduating high school. The United Health Foundation's annual rankings clearly demonstrate a direct corollary between poverty, education and health. Why is poverty related? Part of the answer is obvious, poor people find it difficult to pay for healthcare. This is certainly a large part of the issue but it can overlook the role of prevention. In the case of poverty and its causes chief among them are cultural and/or behavioral choices. This may sound like a nice way of saying it's the victims' fault but the truth is our public institutions are doing a terrible job of teaching our students how relatively easy it is to not live in poverty, succeed and stay healthy in Oklahoma.

It becomes necessary then to ask what causes poverty in the first place? Is it education? Yes. Is it environmental? Yes. Is it the lack of opportunity? No. In Oklahoma and America if an individual wants an education, really wants it, they will get one. Depending on that person's particular school district or system it may not be the best in

the world but if the student applies him or herself it will be enough to give that person a chance at some college somewhere or at least some entry level job somewhere. This is admittedly a low bar but in a land of opportunity it really does not take much to escape poverty and all of the health risk factors associated with it.

Getting back to the initial assertion of this article, Oklahoma has cured poverty, how can it be said that Oklahoma or America has cured poverty when so many of its unhealthy citizens live below poverty or just barely above it? The "cure" is really a preventative treatment whereby we educate our children about the four ingredients that put you most at risk for living in poverty and thus a heightened risk for an unhealthy lifestyle. Those ingredients are:

1. Get as much education as you can but at a absolute minimum graduate high school
2. Get and keep a job. Never let anyone tell you your job is demeaning. You're working on building a resume.
3. Do not get married until you're in your twenties and have completed the bulk of your education.
4. Do not have children until your education is over, you're employed and married.

Most "get healthy" campaigns are aimed at adults or teenagers. They certainly have their place but it can be extremely difficult to get people as old as 16 to change their habits. A better long-term strategy might be to pound home something like this four point mantra to our K-6 graders. Studies have shown that most students at these ages are receptive to being taught. A good deal of what students carry with them into adulthood comes from their early primary education. After that we start to lose many of them to bad environments, and other poor influences. However, while many will certainly be drawn to influences that can impact their lives negatively having a foundation that says: Finish high school, keep your job, wait to get married, don't have kids until you're married, would go a long way to safe guarding our future citizens from making poor decisions. Inundating our K-6 students with this message on the radio, TV, book dust covers, posters, book marks, pencils, pens, T-shirts, pep assemblies, sporting events literally every place they're likely to look on a daily basis just might actually see this cure spread throughout our state's population. It's so simple it just might work ■

*The opinions expressed in the preceeding do not necessarily reflect the opinions of OSU-CHS Center for Rural Health.*