A Time to Champion Prevention

In April, President Barack Obama convened an unprecedented meeting of scientists, government officials, and representatives from universities and technology companies to shine a light on the incontrovertible link between climate and health. Among his invited guests were Mailman School professors of Environmental Health Sciences Patrick Kinney, ScD, and Jeffrey Shaman, PhD ’03, who together direct the nation’s first program on climate change and health in a school of public health. I am hopeful that the president’s recognition that climate change is an urgent public health issue will lead to more awareness and, at long last, political action to address its hazards. This could be a watershed moment.

We will need more such moments in the years ahead. Since I entered public health, I have never seen so great a need to rally around prevention science. Chronic diseases and conditions have grown to epidemic proportions globally. Furthermore, the United States’ health status ranks lowest among our peer nations. Population health must become a national priority. Successfully pursuing that goal depends on building a health system that prioritizes prevention, to bring preventable diseases under control. Our public health system must lead—fully 70 percent of our population’s health is due to public health and prevention measures. Prevention promises healthier as well as longer lives.

The Mailman School has long been motivated by this goal in our research, teaching, and service. And through an array of new programs, we are redoubling our efforts.

As you will see throughout this issue of Columbia Public Health, Mailman School scholars are conducting research to inform prevention policy and practice in areas such as children’s health, the environment, and chronic disease. By committing to an interdisciplinary approach, we heighten the relevance of our work. Family health, for example, requires an understanding of environmental health. Effective healthcare policy depends on big data. And prevention, which works at every age and stage of life, is at the core of all that we do.

Now we must help our elected leaders embrace the cost-effectiveness of preventing chronic as well as infectious diseases and investing for health throughout our lives. And we must be ready to design communities and institutions that promote healthy living. As scholars and citizens, we must prioritize access to healthy food, safe places to walk, mass transit, clean air, affordable housing, and health systems for the 21st century.

To succeed with such an ambitious mission, public health professionals will have to engage ever more vigorously with the elected officials and public servants who craft and implement public policies and programs to promote health and prevent disease.

The sustainability of our healthcare system—and a national commitment to a system that will create health—may well depend upon the foundation laid during the presidential election cycle already underway. Life expectancy has grown dramatically in the United States and around the world. Now is the time to ensure that those longer lives are enjoyed in good health.