

American Academy of Pediatrics

Determinants of Child Health: The Role of the Pediatrician. Community Pediatrics for the 21st Century

Remarks of

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Good afternoon.

Today I'll talk with you today about four topics.

First -- about obtaining better health outcomes for America, stronger economic growth, more jobs, less crime, and strengthening our moral leadership in the world.

Second, I'll talk about how all this is possible if we make the life success of every American kid the highest priority in everything our nation does.

Third, I'll tell you about the Partnership for America's Economic Success, a project to document the economic benefits of investing in early child health, development, nurturing and education.

And fourth -- your role. I'll talk about what you can do to get politicians to see the value of voting to maximize the lifetime wellbeing of every American child.

Here in Virginia we spend millions of dollars for special education, remedial education, tutoring, disciplinary action, truancy and teen crime. We also spend millions on healthcare costs that arise from inadequate attention and treatment early in life. Scientific and economic research findings are increasingly clear -- we wouldn't have to spend so much, if we invest the right way early in every child's life in quality care and education.

When I say early, I mean exactly that -- I mean prenatal. We often hear about the value of prevention. Here is a great example. Rucker Johnson and Robert Shoeni, University of California - Berkeley, in a paper presented to the Invest in Kids working group last week showed that low-birth weight babies are 30% more likely to not graduate from high school, 5% less likely to get and hold jobs, and amazingly, they will have health conditions when they are in their 30s that are characteristic of people 12 years older.

This last finding may not be a surprise to you. In your clinical work, you've probably thought often how problems like untreated ear infections, related hearing loss and language development delays, and vision problems like strabismus, can diminish a child's school and later life performance. But it may not have been clear to you that a dollars and cents benefit estimate might be obtainable and that this estimate can be used with great effectiveness in obtaining your legislative goals. This is the main focus of my comments today.

* These views are solely those of the speaker and should not be presumed to reflect the views of Tudor Investment Corporation or any part of the Tudor Group.

If untreated early health conditions result in lower high school graduation rates, and if we can separate out the other factors at work in a child's life, we can derive a good measure of the economic cost of not providing adequate treatment.

In past decades the benefit/cost payoff for vaccines against hemophilus influenza and polio were overwhelmingly clear. Though they may not have been measured precisely, the economic benefits of preventing millions of otherwise healthy promising teenagers worldwide from contracting polio are clearly greater than the all-in costs of developing and providing the vaccine.

More recently, the benefit/cost payoff for a chicken pox vaccine was less clear. However, when the costs associated with lost school-days and lost parent work-days were factored in, the balance tipped in favor of providing the vaccine.

In medicine generally, this weighing of costs and benefits is reflected in your focus on Quality Adjusted Life Years. A certain known medical intervention costing x is, after a lot of research, found to result in an increase in QALY of y . Mammograms, for example, do not cost much individually, but the costs need to be weighed in terms of the "quality adjusted life-years" added to the lives of patients. Some researchers, I'm told, argue when mammogram costs are evaluated this way, the benefits are hard to justify -- each additional QALY apparently costs hundreds of thousands of dollars.

These same kinds of trade-offs must be weighed as our society considers larger budget issues. In an economy with limited resources, some will ask, is it better to spend hundreds of thousands to add one year to the life of an older woman or the same amount for the health, nurturing and early education of hundreds of children? We could also ask, should our government continue to provide tax subsidies of hundreds of millions of dollars to encourage private jet aircraft use or use the same amount to invest early in the lives of children for pre-natal screening, for instance? We will have to ask, can we afford to lose even just one child when our aging population and standard of living will require more children than ever in our history to reach adulthood healthy and productive?

We know from long-term early care and education research that for economically disadvantaged children, intensive high-quality pre-kindergarten has a benefit- cost payoff of \$7 for every \$1 spent. High quality pre-kindergarten improves elementary school performance, increases high school graduation rates, reduces teen pregnancy and involvement in crime, and increases job acquisition and retention.

High-quality pre-kindergarten costs about \$10,000 per year per child. If local, state, and federal governments provide the resources for parents of economically deprived children to pay for two years of quality pre-kindergarten, the benefit to these governments in terms of lower criminal justice costs and higher income tax revenues is, in present-value terms, about \$150,000. Spend \$20,000 over 24 months and get \$150,000 at the end.

This question was asked in a different form to Senator Obama a few months ago. He was asked, what principle will he use to guide his budget spending choices if he is elected president. The questioner explained that the government budget is more than just money. It reflects relationships between Americans. Budget imbalances are imbalances between Americans by region, sector, income, and generation. The more out of balance the budget is the more difficult and painful it is to resolve.

The questioner pointed out that decades ago another presidential candidate from Illinois was faced with an imbalance between Americans and was asked repeatedly what the highest priority of his presidency would be. That candidate said the principle that would guide his policy choices would be to preserve the Union. He -- Abraham Lincoln obviously -- chose that principle because

he knew that if he could preserve the Union, he would be able to preserve the Constitution and the ideal of the Declaration of Independence that we are all created equal would be expressed in the society.

Senator Obama confidently started to answer that his choices would be transparent, and then he spoke eloquently about the need to focus on economic growth. And then, as he started to say something about education and healthcare, he stopped and said, "I realize as I'm speaking that I'm telling you the choices I'll make, but not the rule that leads me to those choices, and that's what you asked. I don't have an answer to your question, but I understand it and will get back to you."

In the course of this campaign all the candidates must be asked this question. It's a vital one.

For some of us, the answer needs to be: Spending choices at every level of government should be made on the principle of maximizing the lifetime wellbeing of every American child.

Already, more than 20 percent of U.S. workers are functionally illiterate and innumerate. These are the workers who will earn lower wages, pay fewer taxes, and need more public services. Success in our modern economy requires the ability to love and form strong friendships, work in teams, accept change, read, write, and do math. Research clearly shows that the best way to prepare kids to succeed in the future is to invest most in the earliest years of their lives - invest in mothers and fathers before children are born, invest in family strength, invest in zero to three health and nurturing, and invest in quality child care and pre-kindergarten.

There is, however, a 15-year gap between the time an early child hood investment takes place and the point when benefits are clearly evident. There are some near-term effects, like lowering education costs by reducing classroom disruption, special education needs, and grade repetition, but the big payoffs don't show up until children reach early adulthood.

Fifteen years is beyond the planning horizon of most CEOs. It is beyond the re-election horizon of politicians. And it is beyond the horizon of many journalists in today's 24-hour news cycle. To grab the attention and win the support of people who live by shorter deadlines, we have to be able to show them - in black and white, dollars and cents - that investing in children is smart and will pay back economically.

The Partnership for America's Economic Success is doing this. The Partnership for Success is developing the economic case for investing early in children's lives and taking the first steps to arm people like you across the country with the facts to convince government leaders to do the right thing. The Partnership is conducting research in five areas: (1) Microeconomic net benefits of specific interventions. (2) Macroeconomic net benefits of aggregated interventions. (3) Economic dimensions of the youth human capital sector. (4) Public and private finance policy. (5) Communication and advocacy strategies. To see what we are doing and become a member of our partnership, go to www.PartnershipforSuccess.org

What we are talking about is deeper than economics, and we need to keep this in mind. Making America a kids-first nation is a civil rights issue as well as an economic one.

If we do not do what we can do, and know is needed to be done, to enable a child to become an adult who can hold a job and to vote in elections, we deny that child the promise in the Declaration of Independence that everyone has rights to Life, Liberty and Happiness.

That word Happiness is the key. In the Declaration of Independence, it means the happiness that comes from being able to participate economically and politically in our society.

If we do not assure that every child receives the pre-natal care, the love and nurturing, and the early care and education they need in order to participate economically and politically in our society, we deny them the rights promised by the Declaration and guaranteed by our Constitution.

To succeed in making America a kids-first nation, we need a very large partnership. Nationally we will need at least a million people. We need people who understand the economic points we are making and have the personal conviction and courage to attend election town-hall meetings and engage candidates on their principles and voting records. We need people who care about kids and understand the value of early care to make this a election shaping issue. We need those who work in and who are served at child-service sites, including everything from obstetrics offices to high schools, to make kids-first candidates winners in every election in this country.

It can be done. On average in every Congressional district there are 1000 child service sites. There are enough people who work in these sites – docs like you, teachers, and the business people who supply these sites -- and enough people who are served by them – all the parents and family members who love and care about the kids are cared for and educated at this sites – to tip enough campaigns to make Congress and state legislatures kids-first.

Our most potent weapon is something that has little to do with medical or economic findings. Our most important weapon is the deep visceral concern that every person, every voter, has about the life success of their own children and the children in their families and communities, whether they are communities of neighborhoods, ethnic groups or of faith.

If we can succeed in internalizing this deep visceral priority, bringing it into what and how we talk about our legislative and regulatory goals, we'll succeed in making it an external political priority. If we ourselves are kids-first, if we explicitly make the life success of every American child our highest priority and express it in our legislative efforts, we'll draw people to our aspirations.

I'm not a pediatrician. But your child health goals are my goals. If we can link up with millions of others who want America to be a kids-first nation, we'll all succeed.

Thank you.
