

# **Pearson and Seifert: Want something to jump up and down about?**

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Our boisterous national conversation about health care in America has been partisan, negative and focused on many things other than what we need to do to encourage people to take better care of themselves and use our finite health care resources more wisely.

We would like to interrupt this conversation with a positive story about individuals, organizations and communities that have embraced a proactive and realistic strategy to reduce their risk of preventable chronic illness and create the foundation for an enduring culture of wellness.

The Texas Organization of Rural & Community Hospitals addresses the needs of hospitals located in communities that have a higher than average incidence of risk factors for chronic illnesses.

A 2005 survey of member hospitals indicated that containing employee health care costs was their most pressing concern. TORCH, in partnership with LoneStar Wellness, responded with an initiative to reduce employee health care costs and absenteeism and create the evidence-based foundation for a new and sustainable culture of wellness in communities throughout rural Texas.

It's easy to get fit people to participate in a wellness program. The real challenge is to engage those individuals who are least likely to participate in traditional "diet and exercise" programs. When those at-risk participants are successful, they validate the strategy and become powerful agents for change within their organizations, families and communities.

Our strategy is based on the simple premise that people want to be well and will change even deeply entrenched and satisfying behaviors so long as they believe two things: the rewards will outweigh the costs and if they make an honest effort they will be successful.

By focusing on processes rather than results, carefully managing expectations, creating an opportunity that is positive and forgiving and providing organizational support, we're able to

create an environment that fosters well-being so that healthier behaviors are learned and adopted.

The health care debate is focused largely on affordability, and rightly so. How do we provide health care that families can afford and do so in a way that won't bankrupt our nation?

We know that chronic illnesses account for 75 percent of our national spending on health care. We also know that 80 percent of these chronic illnesses are caused by three preventable health behaviors — physical inactivity, poor nutrition and smoking.

This means our individual and collective health and the continued viability of our health care delivery system is largely in our own hands. Unfortunately, the conversation has stayed focused on hot-button issues like predatory insurers and "death panels" rather than proven and cost-effective workplace and community wellness initiatives.

This is especially puzzling because the return on investment — increased productivity and societal benefits of an effective wellness strategy — are well-documented and easy to understand.

This isn't theory. In August, Golden Plains Community Hospital in panhandle town of Borger implemented an employee wellness challenge and achieved the high rate of participation and success that we have come to expect.

Based on this success, the Borger school superintendent implemented the same wellness challenge within his organization. Approximately 65 percent of the 420 Borger school district teachers and staff accepted that challenge and have just completed a highly visible and lively campus-to-campus competition that has captured the attention of their students, spread into the community and created a dialogue about the multiple economic benefits of creating a sustainable culture of wellness in Hutchinson County.

Wellness has gone from abstract concept to proven strategy in Borger. If this can happen in Borger, it can happen here in Austin and in every other community in our state — and the nation.

We encourage everyone to take a fresh look at the opportunities we all have to begin to improve our personal health. Call it healthy living, personal responsibility, "green health," whatever. We already possess what we need to accomplish this. With a little initiative, 300 million Americans can dramatically reduce our health care burden and begin a new, national wellness movement based on knowledge, prevention and sustainability.

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