

Over the course of the past few weeks I have been discussing some of the reasons why the focus of our current health delivery system is off track. We focus too much on controlling and treating disease and not enough on prevention. One of the problems with this approach is that most of the methods we use to treat disease don't actually provide a cure. They reduce a symptom or regulate some aspect of body chemistry.

Stomach acid reducing medications are a prime example. They are used to prevent heartburn, but if the medication were to be stopped, the heartburn would come right back. Many people who take these medications are perfectly happy to do so, since they are often very effective and not too expensive.

There is a downside that I have written about in the past. Most people and very few doctors are aware of this downside. Stomach acid is used to digest protein and kill harmful microorganisms. When the stomach acid is reduced, obviously we can't digest protein as well. Every cell in your body needs protein. Many of the chemicals produced by the body are also made of protein. When insufficient protein is digested, the body cannot build new tissue, repair damaged tissue or create necessary enzymes and hormones.

Most people who regularly take acid reducing medications become anemic for this reason. Many people who take these medications develop thyroid deficiency problems or other hormone deficiency related conditions.

People who take blood pressure regulating medications often suffer the consequences of reduced blood flow to the extremities and the brain, as well as the side effects of these foreign chemicals in the body.

Cholesterol lowering medication, while it can be effective in lowering the cholesterol, it often has a negative affect on other tissues in the body. The benefits of taking these medications have also been exaggerated. Pfizer, the maker of Lipitor, claimed that it resulted in 36% fewer heart attacks. They had to use a statistical slight of hand to claim this however. The truth is that in the study, 3% of people taking a sugar pill had a heart attack while 2% of people taking Lipitor did. There was really only a 1% difference. In other words for every 100 people taking Lipitor, one would not have a heart attack. That means that 99 had to take the medication with the associated side effects and cost for every 1 person who did not have a heart attack.

Another interesting statistic is that even though lowering cholesterol does seem to reduce heart attack deaths to a small degree for certain people, it doesn't lower the overall death rate. In other words, people who take medication to lower cholesterol may have slightly fewer heart attacks, but they die of other things more often. This fact is rarely disclosed by doctors prescribing these medications.

More on this issue next week.