

# HOLD TO THE TRUTH

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Participation in an individual's personal commitment to good health can be one of life's most rewarding experiences. In 1846, exactly one hundred years before I was born, John Quincy Adams said, "*To furnish the means of acquiring knowledge is the greatest benefit that can be conferred upon mankind.*" There can be no more fulfilling achievement than this.

In spite of all the success stories of individuals reducing their risks of preventable disease and achieving good health, it remains perplexing to encounter individuals who firmly defend choices that *cause* health problems. These are the individuals who de-rail the good health message for others while participating in "lunch & learn" classes or in everyday discussion. Clinging to convenient interpretations of media articles supporting their poor health choices, they attack conventional wisdom and rob health professionals of their credibility while confusing those thirsting for good health. Group dynamics experts say that it takes only one negative person to pull five positive others down -- while the converse requires five positives to pull one negative up. These are tough odds to overcome. Mark Twain said, "Keep away from people who belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great." This approach levels the field.

So, kind and considerate messengers of good health -- how do we handle a challenge from a defender of unhealthy choices? Bend a little by offering moderation as compromise, after all it's easy and painless -- to us anyway? The problem with moderation is the interpretation -- the consequence in the outcome. Moderation *as we know it* may be ideal. Unfortunately, moderation as the general public knows it causes heart disease and cancer. Moderation can actually dilute a message of good health to the point of harm. Physicians understand harm -- it's the cornerstone of their creed: "*above all, do no harm.*" Harm is a word we must understand. If we are the cause of harm, then perhaps we should reassess our goals and our obligations.

We are often reminded that our actions have consequences. Robert G. Ingersoll said "*in nature there are neither rewards nor punishments, there are only consequences.*" If wellness is working, why does the rate of lifestyle related illness continue to grow in this country? Why do we ignore societies that exist where heart disease, our number one killer, does not? Scientific studies have shown that heart disease "reverses" for individuals converting from a typical American diet of approximately 40% fat to 10%, while those reducing to 30% don't improve. So, why have policy makers recommended 30% for Americans? When asked, they reply "*Americans aren't capable of great change.*" Is this a message of moderation -- of harm? Assuming Americans are incapable of change is a gross generalization. On the contrary, my travels reveal an amazing number of Americans who are willing to try almost anything to live long and healthy lives -- they just don't always know the truth. I prefer to assume this to be the case for the many rather than the few. It has been said that -- *individuals who make small changes are just as unhappy as those who make large changes* -- the only difference is, that those who make small changes see no results, while those making large changes can see, feel and measure their results.

Perhaps George Bernard Shaw was thinking about those who are blocking the road to good health when he said, "*Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.*"

Of the thousands of individuals we screen each year, *the majority* of smokers want to quit, the majority of obese want to lose weight and the majority of inactive are willing to exercise. These are individuals "at risk" for early death and disability and *the majority* of them *will* find their way into our hospitals for the treatment of their "lifestyle" related diseases.

I have paraphrased the following thought from *The 10% Solution for a Healthier Life*, by Raymond Kurzweil, because he captures the essence of responsibility and places it where it belongs -- on the individual. I believe that good health *is* attainable by making informed choices.

*There are a lot of people who think they are eating a "low" level of fat and cholesterol, while their diets are still very excessive in these substances because the generally broadcast guidelines are inadequate. Fortunately, we do have respect in our society for the scientific method, and that will be our saving grace. Even though the evidence is growing, moving the recommendations in the right direction will take time. If it takes as long as the recommendation against smoking, it will be another thirty years before the optimal recommendations are public policy. **We don't have to wait that long.***

A strong commitment to science, medicine and my fellow man has led me to believe that "*wellness is the service of truth through science to help others achieve a life without preventable illness.*" Linus Carl Pauling, a great American scientist once said, "*Science is the search for truth, it is not a game in which one tries to beat his opponent, to do harm to others.*" The data exists -- good health is attainable. Our challenge as health educators is to establish and defend an effective and consistent message -- one of truth -- so that those desiring "optimal health" can find it. Trust offers the vehicle for the truth. Always a key to successful education, trust is hard to gain when a message can be altered for convenience or profit. When the message of good health loses scientific validity, it becomes unclear and relinquishes its value. A little sugar coating is acceptable as long as the formula (*the truth*) remains inviolate. After all, it is the truth that insures the trust.

Health professionals must not waver when challenged by *opponents* of optimal nutrition, smoking cessation and safe exercise. Health professionals must not give in to opportunists selling shortcuts and miracle cures. If one person seeking optimal health is misled and subsequently harmed from our inability or unwillingness to hold to the truth of science, the field of health promotion is not a worthy profession and there is no hope.

When the message remains constant and individuals achieve good health from trusting messengers of truthful data, our fellow man will be armed with the knowledge to choose good health over poor. Messengers of good health -- stand your ground, hold to the truth and good health has a chance of becoming the rule rather than the exception.

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