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Is an ounce of prevention worth a pound of cure?

Scientists set new standards for finding out.

In a time of increasing public concern over government spending, communities often are forced to make difficult decisions about how to support those in need. Hard choices are being made daily across the country about what programs should be cut so new investments might be made. Yet, to ensure that tax dollars have the greatest benefit to society, policymakers need accurate information about the costs and benefits of public programs and policies. Unfortunately, few such estimates are readily available for interventions that seek to prevent many of society’s greatest ills. Researchers are trying to change that.

Today the Society for Prevention Research (SPR) released a new set of standards to guide how researchers and public health officials estimate the costs, benefits and return on investment of prevention programs. These standards were developed through the Mapping Advances in Prevention Science initiative funded by the National Institutes of Health’s National Institute on Drug Abuse. This initiative formed a task force of leading experts in prevention science, public finance and economics with the goal of identifying best practices to understand the economic impact of investments in prevention. This taskforce was convened in light of increasing evidence that prevention is not only a good investment, but may be more cost-effective then downstream treatment for a number of societal problems. The taskforce was co-chaired by Dr. Max Crowley (Penn State University) and Dr. Kenneth Dodge (Duke University).

“Prevention science is an interdisciplinary field that touches on nearly every domain of public and private life. These standards provide guidance for the scientific community to conduct research that not only meets the pressing needs of our society, but can be used to guide how we invest limited public resources.” reflected Dr. Crowley.

Over a three year period the SPR taskforce engaged in outreach with professional organizations and researchers around the world to build consensus around standards for conducting rigorous and replicable estimates of the value of preventive interventions. The standards were designed to support the development of high quality and high utility economic estimates that can be used for public budgeting. Ultimately, the task force hopes these estimates will lead to more effective and efficient interventions that improve health and wellbeing for all.

Leslie Leve, President of the Society for Prevention Research remarked that “Developing standards for measuring the costs and public health benefits of prevention programs underscores the prevention science community’s commitment to conducting research that directly improves the lives of all. Through these standards, we aim to make the economic impact of prevention research accessible to those making public funding decisions.”

The standards were published today in the journal Prevention Science. They are available here in an open access format through the support of the Society for Prevention Research from a grant (Award No. R13DA033149) from the National Institutes of Health.