Foreword

An Ounce of Prevention?

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In the February 4, 1735 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin wrote that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Mr Franklin was not referring to medicine when he penned the now-famous line. He instead was referring to the importance of fire safety and the need for the city of Philadelphia to be better prepared to prevent and react to fires. In his article, he noted the importance of tending to how hot coals were being transferred in shovels (primary prevention), how chimneys should be cleaned regularly (primary prevention), and how a “club or society of active men” (firefighters) should be formed who can efficiently extinguish fires (tertiary prevention).

Despite the original context of Mr Franklin’s quotation, it has been used repeatedly in the field of medicine to stress the importance of disease prevention and early detection. The fundamental notion that preventing disease before it strikes holds significant value to patients and providers. Yet, primary prevention is often difficult and may require substantial lifestyle changes that challenge even the most devout patients. Early detection (secondary prevention) is even more controversial. If a disease is diagnosed in a presymptomatic phase, it would make sense that a better outcome would ensue. However, large trials have challenged this assumption. Concepts of lead time, length time, and overdiagnosis bias have emerged to explain the limited evidence for specific screening tests. Furthermore, if outcome is not improved, unnecessary harm may ensue due to morbidity and mortality from treatments that were not going to affect overall disease survival. Perhaps an ounce of prevention is not so valuable.

In this issue of *Medical Clinics of North America*, Drs Pignone and Bibbins-Domingo have enlisted an impressive group of experts to critically evaluate the preventive medicine literature. Emphasis has been placed on primary prevention of cardiovascular disease and cancer. However, the importance of other conditions seen in primary care practice has not been overlooked. Drs Jonas and Garbutt discuss the importance of
alcohol abuse screening, while Drs Smithson and Pignone elaborate on the utility of screening for depression. I am confident that this issue will serve as a valuable resource.

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