



Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues:

“Spring forward” is a cheery phrase that nonetheless elicits groans when March rolls around. Daylight saving time already? Although this annual ritual subtracts just an hour from our lives, for children and teens, sixty minutes of sleep is a big deal. This month, I am going to discuss how we can help children and teens strike the right balance with healthy behaviors like adequate sleep and how broader insurance coverage is an essential building block of preventive health.

Balancing Healthy Behaviors in Children and Teens: As clinicians, we know the sleep recommendations that the American Academy of Pediatrics defines as adequate for physical and mental health and behavioral and performance outcomes: 9 to 12 hours for children ages 6-12 years and 8 to 10 hours for teens 13-18 years. But adequate sleep is no longer a standalone measure of health: physical activity and screen time behaviors are critical parts of the equation. And, as a new study¹ published in *JAMA Pediatrics* points out, balancing the three is proving to be a challenge.

The *JAMA* study found that just one in twenty U.S. children and teens gets the amount of sleep, exercise, and screen time that doctors recommend for optimal health. In addition to the above sleep recommendations, children ages 6-18 years should accumulate at least one hour of moderate-intensity or vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity within a 24-hour period and limit exposure to all screen-based digital media to less than two hours during that time span.

Meeting each of these recommendations is the best prevention against obesity, mental health issues like anxiety and depression, poor academic achievement, and unhealthy behaviors like smoking and drinking. We cannot think of these three health benchmarks in isolation. Squeezing one end of a balloon only puts pressure on the other. The gradual creep of minutes that many children spend in front of a digital screen only steals from sleep and exercise time.

We need clinicians to join parents and be vocal advocates to local school systems to support youth in meeting exercise, sleep, and screen-time recommendations. Research has shown many benefits from schools increasing time for exercise and changing schedules to accommodate youth sleep patterns. Encouraging parents to remove screens and phones from the bedroom would also help decrease screen time and improve sleeping. As the father of a toddler and a newborn, I recognize the value of adequate sleep from birth onward. As New York State Commissioner of Health and as a pediatrician, I encourage you to help us strike the healthy balance that doctors recommend for young lives.

¹ Knell G, Durand CP, Kohl HW, et al. Prevalence and Likelihood of Meeting Sleep, Physical Activity and Screen-Time Guidelines Among US Youth. *JAMA Pediatrics*. published online February 4, 2019.

Insurance Coverage and Preventive Health: Probably the most significant long-term effect that the New York State Department of Health (Department) can have on the working lives of clinicians across the State is our commitment to transforming New York's healthcare system into one focused on wellness rather than crisis management. One of the building blocks for that important shift is broadening access to quality healthcare.

This year we saw record enrollment in each of New York's 62 counties for high-quality health insurance options through the New York State of Health. Total Marketplace enrollment is now over 4.7 million—an increase of more than 435,000 New Yorkers from 2018.

Getting more New Yorkers insured is the first step to instilling in the public the habit of preventive care visits. I know the frustration when a clinician's first meeting with a patient involves managing conditions—some life-threatening—that could have been prevented with much earlier visits. Many of the leading killers of Americans are chronic diseases that can be prevented with healthy habits and routine screening—everything from flu shots to checks on blood pressure, cholesterol, and risk of diabetes to colon cancer screening and vaccinations.

Primary care clinicians want nothing more than to address problems before they arise—it prevents future pain and suffering, adds years to patients' lives, and saves money. New York State's Prevention Agenda is a practical blueprint to make this approach to wellness the norm for populations that have historically experienced disparities in health outcomes. The Department has played a central role in New York's Health Across All Policies initiative to integrate health considerations into the policymaking of such sectors as housing, transportation, education, environment, parks, and economic development.

The more New Yorkers we can connect with quality healthcare, the sooner we will realize a prevention-based system of care that leads to healthier and longer lives for all. Thank you for the important part you play in this ongoing mission. Wishing you all the very best.

Sincerely,



Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D.