

By Anthony Biglan

For The Register-Guard

There is something new under the sun in Lane County: Virtually all sectors of the community are joining together to create a comprehensive, coordinated, evidence-based public health approach to the well-being of every Lane County citizen.

With the leadership of United Way, PacificSource, the Lane County Public Health Department, Trillium and many other organizations too numerous to mention, Lane County is creating a public health movement that is likely to reduce the level of virtually every psychological, behavioral and health problem that plagues our communities.

The movement stems in part from the tremendous advances that have been made in our ability to prevent health and behavioral problems. Over the past 20 years research has accumulated that shows that problems as seemingly diverse as obesity, academic failure, depression and delinquency can be prevented.

No longer do we need to wait until tragic things happen. We can prevent them.

The public health movement is motivated by three core ideas:

- 1) Our communities need to focus on changing the prevalence of problems, not simply addressing a given problem when it arises in one individual.
- 2) It is critical to focus on the prevention of problems. The evidence is clear that for virtually every health or behavioral problem — from crime to cardiovascular disease — we can prevent the problem rather than waiting until it develops and treating it then.
- 3) There are important social and environmental determinants of these problem behaviors. We cannot prevent or ameliorate these problems solely by trying to get individuals to change their behavior.

Health and behavioral problems develop in environments. And to a surprising extent, the same environments contribute to diverse problems.

In particular, stressful family, school, workplace, and community environments contribute to problems as diverse as depression, obesity, cardiovascular disease, academic failure, child abuse, marital conflict and the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.

That is why the major business, government, nonprofit and health organizations in Lane County are developing coordinated, comprehensive efforts to change the conditions that lead to these problems.

As this effort gains speed, we can expect to see significant improvements in the number of children who succeed in school. We can expect to see substantial reductions in psychological and physical illness, as well as reductions in crime and conflict.

The public health movement is highly pragmatic. It employs whatever programs, policies and practices work to affect a problem.

The tobacco control movement is an excellent example. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars spent by the tobacco industry to obscure the harm of smoking, we have dramatically changed the culture of smoking. Forty years ago, any public meeting you attended would have been in a smoke-filled room. But thanks to relentless research and advocacy about the harm of smoking and what can be done about it, the prevalence of smoking

has been cut in half and continues to decline.

The tobacco control movement has used media and policies to influence people to quit smoking and to prevent young people from starting. It has mobilized public opinion against the marketing practices of the tobacco companies and in support of clean indoor air policies, higher taxes on tobacco products, and many other tobacco control policies.

The same strategy is being applied in Lane County to address all of the other problems that have traditionally plagued our communities. In the months to come, I will report on what key leadership organizations in Lane County are doing to prevent the most common and costly health, psychological and behavioral problems that endanger the lives and well-being of Lane County citizens.

I will describe the tobacco control movement in Lane County and the efforts of Success by Six to ensure that every young child arrives at the kindergarten with the skills he or she needs need to succeed academically and socially.

I will tell about the tremendous resources we have in Lane County to provide solid, evidence-based family support that can prevent child abuse and children's behavioral problems, while at the same time helping children develop the cognitive, social and self-regulatory skills to succeed.

I will describe how a coordinated set of organizations is working to end the epidemic of obesity that threatens to leave the current generation of children with shorter life expectancies than their parents.

I am confident that these efforts will succeed. My confidence stems from the enormous research evidence that shows what can be done — provided we implement evidence-based policies, programs and practices and continue to refine them through ongoing research.

It also stems from the realization that an ever-growing number of civic, governmental, business and nonprofit organizations in Lane County are identifying things they can do to improve well-being in Lane County and are taking the actions needed to move forward.