

# PULSE

June 2008

of the North Texas health-care community



## WOMEN'S WORK

Helping men  
to help  
themselves

## CONTINUING EDUCATION:

Protecting  
children  
from skin  
breakdowns

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# The masculine mistake

BY ESTHER M. BAUER

**[A]**merican men are out of touch with the health-care system.

Consider this: The Commonwealth Fund, a Washington-based policy institute, published a nationwide study that said American men have “only limited contact with physicians and the health-care system generally...many fail to get routine checkups, preventive care or health counseling, and they often ignore symptoms or delay seeking medical attention when sick or in pain. When they do seek care, social taboos or embarrassment can sometimes prevent men from openly discussing health concerns with their physicians.”

Not much has changed in the eight years since that study was published.

The problem remains so pervasive that the federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed an Internet marketing program, “Real Men Wear Gowns,” encouraging men to pursue early detection measures that could save their lives.

Laura DeFina, M.D., a physician at the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, calls the tendency of men to avoid preventive health screenings a “huge issue.”

Men are twice as likely not to have been

to the doctor in the last two years, especially in the 30-50 age group, whereas women far outnumber men in a doctor’s office. That avoidance reduces the potential for controlling such precursors to cardiovascular disease as high cholesterol and hypertension, she says.

Because medical avoidance generally isn’t an issue among women — due to their relatively early introduction to gynecological health care — wives, girlfriends and female relatives often are the best at convincing men to seek preventive care.

“Whenever health care touches a family, it’s an opportunity to make sure that the other members of the family are getting the preventive guidance they need so the whole family can be healthy,” Dr. DeFina says.

As long as they don’t push too hard, women often can do for men what they won’t do for themselves. To that end, Dr. DeFina considers nurses a key resource for teaching women how to guide their men into and through the health-care system.

## AT A GLANCE

- Men generally avoid seeking medical help until a health problem is chronic or acute.
- Women can positively influence men’s health.
- Nurses are key resources for teaching women how to guide men through the health-care system.

Nurses would do well as patient advocates, she says, to offer these tips to female patients concerned about the health of the men in their lives:

**Educate:** Teach him to calculate his body mass index (BMI) and to develop a weight-loss goal, if necessary (visit [www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/)).

**Open the door:** Remind him that he should have his cholesterol checked by age 35. In his 30s, he should be checked for hypertension and rechecked every two years.

**Help him make a doctor’s appointment:** Facilitate the appointment, put it on his calendar and, if appropriate, contact his administrative assistant to ensure the time is blocked out.

**Support him throughout the process:** Visit the doctor with him and help him ask follow-up questions. If he isn’t comfortable with that doctor, help him find another. In addition, Dr. DeFina suggests that women arm themselves with educational tools and resources such as the “Real Men Wear Gowns” Web site, [www.ahrq.gov/realmen/](http://www.ahrq.gov/realmen/).

“Often men are reluctant, especially if they are feeling well,” says Martha Kingman, a family nurse practitioner in the Pulmonary Division of St. Paul University Hospital at UT Southwestern. For her, making the appointment for men is a crucial first step. ■



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### REALITY CHECK:

Too many men avoid preventive health screenings, according to Dr. Laura DeFina, center.