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The majority of health-related care in this country does not involve physician appointments and hospitalizations. Rather, most care Americans receive is due to the efforts of everyday people managing their own health through “self-care” — broadly defined as the actions and decisions individuals take for themselves and their families to stay well, prevent disease, manage their minor ailments and maintain control over their chronic diseases and conditions.

In countries like Canada, where self-care has become a national movement, it is estimated that over 80 percent of all health care is self-care¹ and it is likely the same is true in the U.S. This is because the vast majority of health problems people confront involve minor ailments, such as headaches and joint pain, sore throats, coughs and colds, and gastrointestinal distress, which can be effectively treated with over-the-counter (OTC) medicines. The same is true for chronic medical conditions like arthritis, diabetes and hypertension where patients

can be taught the skills to manage all that a long-term disease entails including symptoms, treatment, physical and social consequences and lifestyle changes.

Recognizing that health systems are paying unnecessarily high costs for self-treatable conditions, many nations are implementing policies that support self-care, backed by a growing body of evidence that self-care can improve health outcomes, improve symptom management, and bring health expenditures under control.

At the same time, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) includes self-care as one of four pillars to build a better health delivery system in the U.S. In its landmark 2013 report, *Bringing a Health Systems Approach to Health*, the IOM concludes that up to 30 percent of the nation’s health expenditures are unnecessary or wasted³ and calls for moving to a consumer-driven health delivery system where consumers are full partners with health professionals in decisions about their care.

IN FACT



In Canada, opinion polls find that **90 percent** of the public agrees with the statement:

“IF OUR HEALTHCARE SYSTEM IS TO REMAIN SUSTAINABLE, IT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER THAT GOVERNMENTS IN CANADA PROVIDE CANADIANS WITH THE TOOLS THEY NEED TO PRACTICE RESPONSIBLE SELF-CARE FOR HEALTHY LIVING.”





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The IOM's call for change also comes at a time when society is changing and the public wants more information, choice and control over the health care they receive. The most recent evidence is a national survey of more than 2,000 adult Americans commissioned by the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPIE) and conducted by the research firm Ipsos, which shows that people are taking greater ownership of their health beyond the doctor's office. Among the findings, consumers associate self-care practices with better preventive care (87 percent), improved consultations with doctors (83 percent) and being proactive in scheduling wellness checkups (80 percent). Additionally, 64 percent say they could make more decisions about health-related matters with increased self-care knowledge and skills.

Yet, the U.S. has yet to embrace self-care as an essential component of the nation's health system, despite increasing public support and the IOM's recommendations. As a result, both the public and health professionals are confused about the meaning of self-care and consumers generally remain unclear about the regulatory environment and their ability to access, purchase, and use OTC medications.

There are serious consequences to the nation's limited awareness and appreciation of self-care principles. Besides not achieving the IOM's goal of moving to a patient-centered health system, the impact will be escalating costs for treating chronic conditions like arthritis, diabetes, and hypertension where self-care strategies can improve disease management. Also of significance are the billions spent on avoidable physician

services and emergency room visits because Americans lack the self-care skills to manage their minor illnesses and injuries. Currently, more than \$18 billion is spent annually on "avoidable" emergency room visits alone.⁴

As a nonprofit multi-stakeholder coalition advancing the appropriate use of medicines, NCPIE seeks to be the agent for meaningful change. Towards this end, NCPIE convened a group of advisors from leading professional societies, voluntary health organizations, government agencies and industry with the goal of assessing the opportunities for self-care in the U.S. and agreeing on a roadmap for action. What follows are the findings from this comprehensive review and a blueprint for accelerating progress, especially regarding the appropriate selection and use of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and other self-care strategies that are necessary for the treatment of minor ailments and the daily management of chronic conditions.

NCPIE calls on all stakeholders — the public health community, health professionals, voluntary health and caregiving organizations, patient advocates, consumer leaders, policymakers, health plans and members of industry — to join us in our goal of building a self-care movement in the U.S. By joining together, we can create an environment in which self-care is accepted as a necessary and valuable component of the health care system and Americans feel empowered to take an active role in decisions about their care. It is time to make self-care a national priority.

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