



Editor's Notes

ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER: MORE IMPORTANT THAN HEALTH PROMOTION

Most of the time, I feel our readers' work in refining techniques and managing health promotion programs in workplace, clinical, educational and community settings is more important than any other work in the world. After all, 40% of premature deaths, nearly one million deaths per year, are caused by lifestyle problems they are working to prevent. They do this work with little visibility and modest compensation. Working with these professionals is my privilege and pleasure. It makes me come to work with enthusiasm and excitement every day. However, in the last year I met two people, Gary White and Dean Kamen, who make me think their work is probably more important than our work. Nearly one billion people in the world do not have access to safe drinking water, and this causes an estimated 80% of all sickness in the world. Gary and Dean have separately come up with strategies that could end this problem forever, if they work together.

Gary White is the founder and president of Water Partners (www.water.org). Gary quit his job as a water process engineer, called a meeting of close friends from his church and told them he needed their financial support to help him implement a new strategy to provide safe drinking water to people in the poorest nations of the world. Gary's solution was an economic and organizational solution. He discovered that even the poorest people were willing and able to pay small weekly or monthly installments for access to safe drinking water. The money they paid was sufficient to finance the construction and ongoing management of water purification and distribution systems. Initially, Water Partners raised money to give communities grants to build and manage these systems. In recent years, they have added a loan program and recycled the loan payments to other communities. Water Partners is still a tiny organization supported primarily by donations, but contributors have started to take notice. They raised \$20,000 in 1993, \$120,000 in 1998, \$828,000 in 2004, and more than \$2.7 million in 2005. To date, they have developed sustainable, safe drinking water systems in 144 communities in Bangladesh, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iraq, and the Philippines.

I asked Gary how much it would cost to use his system to provide safe drinking water to the one billion people who do not yet have access. He thought that environmental problems would

probably make it very difficult to reach 2% of that group, but for the rest, it would cost about \$100 per person or about \$100 billion. If we were willing to wait four years, the money could be recycled and the cost would drop to \$25 billion. Twenty five billion dollars. To provide safe water to everyone in the world, and to stimulate the economic benefits that would accrue. Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, the Walton family, and a handful of others could pay for this themselves. The 10 richest nations in the world could contribute \$2.5 billion each and come up with that sum. For the United States, this would represent about one tenth of one percent of its annual spending ... to provide safe water to everyone in the world.

Dean Kamen is the founder of DEKA Research and Development (www.dekaresearch.com), holder of over 150 patents and one of the most creative and innovative inventors in the world. His inventions include the first portable infusion pump, a portable dialysis machine, a vascular stent, and the Segway. One of his latest inventions is a water purifier that Dean says can convert any liquid into safe drinking water. If anyone besides Dean Kamen made this claim, I would not believe it for a second, and I must admit I am still skeptical. I asked Dean the same question about how much it would cost to produce enough of his devices to provide safe water to everyone in the world. He said the cost would be about \$10 per person, which works out to \$10 billion. Ten billion dollars to provide safe water to virtually every person in the world. If we did this over four years and recycle the funds using Gary's system, we need only \$2.5 billion. Several hundred people in the world could pay for that themselves. It would be a rounding error if split among the 10 richest nations. I told Dean about Gary and called Gary the next day. As it turns out Gary was aware of Dean and DEKA was aware of Water Partners, but they had not yet met personally. Let's see what happens.

I think I am going to stick with health promotion, but I have to take my hat off to Gary and Dean. What they are doing can change the world ... for one billion people.

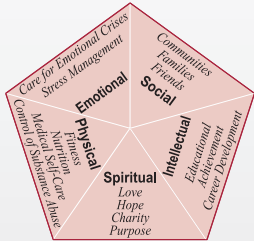
Michael O'Donnell

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“Health Promotion is the science and art of helping people change their lifestyle to move toward a state of optimal health. Optimal health is defined as a balance of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual health. Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of efforts to enhance awareness, change behavior and create environments that support good health practices. Of the three, supportive environments will probably have the greatest impact in producing lasting change.”

(O'Donnell, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 1989, 3(3):5.)

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