

YOUR HEALTH MATTER?

by Benson Medina

It's been almost a year since I started moderating two community outreach groups that meet twice monthly to discuss healthcare issues on Hawai'i Island. As part of a two-year grant administered by the County of Hawai'i and non-profit Community First, we focus on issues such as COVID-19, chronic illnesses, telehealth and cultural issues among Native Hawaiians, Filipinos, Pacific Islanders and Hispanics. The goal of the project is to improve ones understanding of personal health and how to access healthcare.

Our conversations are rich and meaningful and we delve into our own cultural upbringings and the healthcare messages we learned from our parents and kupuna. While our purpose is to discuss ways we can improve access to our local healthcare network, we often land on two "realities" that are challenging obstacles for many locals: 1) cultural norms that don't prioritize the individual healthcare of adults and 2) the reluctance of some of our local population to seek healthcare unless the need is critical. In other words, many of our local people only access our healthcare system in an emergency and typically, through the emergency room at one of our local hospitals.

Healthcare on Hawai'i Island is affected by many aspects that are not necessarily about health but have huge impacts on a person's overall health. Issues like housing, income level, employment (or lack of) and domestic problems all play a critical role in the overall health of our residents. These are complex issues that have no easy or obvious solution, even if abundant funding existed. Bringing more health care providers to the island, lowering healthcare costs and being more receptive to cultural barriers, like language and trust will draw more residents to our primary care providers.

DOES MY PERSONAL HEALTHCARE MATTER?

On the surface, this sounds like a no-brainer, hell "YES", answer. But it's complicated when many of our residents live in "survival mode" (better known as "paycheck to paycheck") where putting food on the table trumps a co-pay for a doctor's visit. Parents prioritize the health of their children but don't always see the correlation between their personal health and the future welfare of their children. Some cultural perspectives see the focus on "personal self-care" as selfish and neglectful.

But the cultural norms of a community can be changed if there's a collective consciousness to focus on individual healthcare. School-age children are constantly getting education and messaging that their health matters and much attention and resources are being devoted to kupuna care. Healthcare non-profits like Community First can facilitate the conversation but they need strategic alliances with other non-profits, educational institutions, Chambers of Commerce, cultural organizations, service groups like Rotary, Lions and Kiwanis, schools, businesses and our local government to make the kind of impact that can create a culture of wellness on our island.

Like the Native Hawaiians who worked together to sustain the ancient *ahupua'a*, we have to use our individual and group energies for the benefit of all. No one person or group can facilitate a cultural change of that magnitude but it has to start with the person in the mirror. The starting

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point is assembling individuals who are willing to say out loud: **MY HEALTH MATTERS!** That commitment to prioritize personal health could be the *huliau* (the turning point) to take Hawai'i Island in a healthy direction for many generations to come.

This editorial is brought to you by Community First a 501 (c) 3 non-profit founded by the late Barry Taniguchi. For more information, please visit our website at www.communityfirsthawaii.org or Facebook and Instagram pages at [@communityfirsthawaii](https://www.facebook.com/communityfirsthawaii).