



# e-quilibrium

- "electronic briefs on behavior and health"

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## Europe

My goal in writing this monthly e-letter is to highlight behavioral factors that are associated with health. Most months I try to give some emphasis to things people can do to improve health or decrease risks to health. The behavioral recommendation this month is a bit more extreme than most: move to Europe!

How can this be? Spending on medical care in the United States is at least two times higher per person than in European countries. Worldwide, half of the money spent on medical care occurs in the United States, even though the US population represents only about 5% of the world's population. The US certainly must be the healthiest country on the planet. But as you know, this isn't the case.

A recent analysis, published this year in the American Journal of Epidemiology, found that across the lifespan, individuals in the United States have higher rates of chronic illness and objective indicators of disease than do their counterparts in England. This pattern was present even when data were analyzed for whites only, health insurance status, weight status, income categories, and non-smoking non-drinkers. An earlier study, published in 2009 in the American Journal of Public Health, found a similar pattern when comparing US adults to European adults (11 countries including England), aged 50 - 74 years of age. It is also noteworthy that the English are typically found to have poorer health status in such analyses than their European counterparts. The individuals who have the worst health in these studies are the

poor in the United States. The health of the rich in the US is not as good as the health of the rich in Europe.

Obviously there are many perspectives on why the health status of people in the United States is not as good as those in Europe. European countries typically put more emphasis on prevention and primary care than does the US. This is thought to be an important reason why one is less likely to have chronic illness in Europe. It should be noted, however, that if one gets sick, survival rates are higher in the United States than in Europe, likely because the United States places greater emphasis on the treatment of disease.

Epidemiologists and health economists describe other factors that may contribute to the health status differences between the United States and European countries. These include policies and practices with respect to working conditions, transportation options, families, housing, and social safety nets. It has also been suggested that the American emphasis on individualism and achievement over social integration and community may have a health impact.

Most of us will not choose to move to Europe in pursuit of better health, so is there anything in these studies that point to what an individual can do in the interest of health? No matter where one lives, health behaviors matter. A healthy diet, regular exercise, and plentiful sleep are among the basics. To the extent possible, get primary health care. Emphasize work/life balance. Be sure to vacation... something Europeans appear to emphasize more than Americans!

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: [paul.hershberger@wright.edu](mailto:paul.hershberger@wright.edu)

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021