PREVENTIVE MEDICINE: AN ATTEMPT AT A DEFINITION

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The relief of pain is an important function of medicine. It is often the physician's first duty to "make the patient comfortable." As soon as clinical medicine gets beyond this palliative stage, however, it becomes preventive medicine. The major function of the physician is to hold disease in check lest disability or death result from it; in other words, to prevent the graver consequences of dysfunction. While it is possible to distinguish between preventive and palliative medicine, it is difficult and generally unprofitable to draw a line between preventive and curative medicine. To cure disease is to cut it short—to prevent its continuance—and so to prevent the consequences of its continuance. Preventive medicine might logically be defined as all medicine that seeks to alter the course of disease or to better the patient's physiological status.

1 A memorandum prepared in connection with the activities of The Commonwealth Fund.
Editor's Summary

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