

Good Behavior



Center for Advancing Health

George Clooney Was Onto Something

In the Oscar-nominated movie "Up in the Air," Ryan Bingham (aka George Clooney), travels around the country firing employees for company bosses who don't have the stomach to do it themselves -- the ones who prefer to "outsource the downsizing function."

He finds his own job threatened by a hotshot business school graduate who convinces the president of their company that it would be more efficient to do the long-distance layoffs via the Internet.

Sitting in a hotel bar, our hero makes a passionate speech to his young colleague about how important it is to fire people face-to-face: that a look in the eye, a few words that personalize the institutional rejection and a handshake allow them to maintain some small shred of dignity at the very moment they lose their identity as a valued employee.

This speech resonates with me as I contemplate the waves of e-mail notices in my inbox announcing new electronic tools and personalized Web-based services and sites that can help me take care of myself. I can take a picture of my rash with my iPhone and send it to my dermatologist. I can check online to see when I had my last tetanus shot or schedule my next mammogram. I like interacting with my doctors by e-mail about minor matters. And if I lived in the empty plains of Eastern Montana, I would probably often prefer a telemedicine visit with a doctor or nurse over a 10-hour round-trip drive for a 20-minute in-person appointment.

What takes place during an in-person visit -- the physical examination, the conversation, the look in the eye and the handshake -- that can't be accomplished any other way?

I have a hunch that the value of the in-person firing -- as opposed to online -- so passionately defended by George Clooney's character is dwarfed by the value of the face-to-face, hands-on meeting between me and my doctor or nurse practitioner...that sometimes the interaction between us is a critically important part of my doctor's diagnosis and treatment recommendations as well as my willingness to participate in care.

The active ingredients in that interaction are not widely specified or quantified. And while most people and most health professionals probably share my hunch that in-person interactions are sometimes critical, all of us appear to be willing to forego such contact at different times for reasons of convenience and expense.

High cost and poor efficiency are cruel taskmasters, though, and the drive -- by health plans, the government and providers -- to reduce the former and improve the latter is well served by out-sourcing interactions between us and our doctors to automated and Web-based programs and services. How will they -- and we -- know when the balance tips -- when the lack of the physical encounter, the look in the eye; the hand on the shoulder begin to erode the quality of care we receive and the outcomes we hope for?

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From the Health Behavior News Service

The Health Behavior News Service regularly distributes stories summarizing new research on health behavior issues. These stories can be found online at <http://www.cfah.org/hbns/news/>

February News Stories:

- **MORE FLEXIBILITY AT WORK BOOSTS EMPLOYEE HEALTH** A new evidence review suggests that giving employees more flexibility over their work schedules is likely to boost their health as judged by measures like blood pressure and stress.
- **FED WHEN HUNGRY, PREMATURE BABIES GO HOME SOONER** Although many parents and health care providers attempt to schedule a preterm newborn's feeding pattern, a new review suggests that feeding in response to the infant's own hunger cues might result in earlier discharge from the hospital.
- **BREAST CANCER RATES DECLINE MOST FOR AFFLUENT WHITE WOMEN** Breast cancer rates are declining, but some groups have seen a more significant decline than others, with race, ethnicity and economic background playing a part.
- **IS YOUR BACK PAIN CAUSED BY HERNIATED DISC? SINGLE TEST CAN'T TELL** No single diagnostic test is good at discriminating between patients who have a herniated disc and patients who do not, finds a new Cochrane review on diagnosing back pain.
- **CIGARETTE ADS FUEL TEENS' DESIRE TO START SMOKING** The more that teens see cigarette ads, the greater their risk of taking a puff.
- **SCHOOL STD PROGRAMS HAVE LIMITED INFLUENCE ON TEENS' SEXUAL BEHAVIORS** Teaching teens about sexually transmitted infections at school boosts factual knowledge, but does not necessarily translate to increased condom use, according to a new evidence review from the United Kingdom.
- **SPANISH-LANGUAGE ADS GET MESSAGE ACROSS FOR SMOKING QUIT LINES** It pays to advertise. It especially pays to advertise in Spanish if you want Spanish speakers to use a telephone helpline to quit smoking.

CFAH CENTER FOR
ADVANCING
HEALTH
Evidence. Engagement. Equity.

Since its founding in 1992, The Center for Advancing Health (CFAH) has worked to translate complex scientific evidence into information, policies and programs that will ensure that each person can make good decisions about their health and interact effectively with their health care providers. CFAH is an independent, non-profit organization that is supported by a number of philanthropic organizations (principally the Annenberg Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and individuals. Good Behavior is a monthly series, written by the Center's president, Jessie Gruman, PhD, and intended for health policy makers. The publication offers Dr. Gruman's perspective on emerging health care issues, and provides insight based on evidence about how best to address them. For more information, visit us online at www.cfah.org