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Posted on Sat, Nov. 30, 2002

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

When doctor's orders come up short

By TRACY WHEELER
Knight Ridder Newspapers

You have high blood pressure. You have a few pounds to lose. Your cholesterol is higher than it should be.

That much your doctor can tell you.

But when it comes to telling you what to do about it -- outside of scribbling a prescription -- the doctor may have little advice.

Doctors, after all, are trained to diagnose disease, then treat it. Have high blood pressure? Try a calcium channel blocker or beta blocker. High cholesterol? Take Lipitor, Zocor or another statin. Diabetes? Here's a prescription for insulin.

"That's a very different perspective from, 'Gee, maybe we can do something to stop this from happening in the first place,'" said Stephen Havas, a professor of preventive medicine at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

That "something" boils down to diet and exercise, areas in which few doctors have much expertise. How could they? Fewer than 25 percent of medical schools require nutrition courses. And when nutrition courses are offered as electives, only 6 percent of medical school students sign up.

"Whenever I give lectures (to doctors) I ask, 'How many of you have had any nutritional training?' No one raises his hand, or maybe one person raises his hand," said Michael Miller, a cardiologist and director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. "We lack this information. It's a big issue. It's a big problem.

"Patients in some cases know more than their physician because of what they've seen on the Internet or what they saw on TV or what they read in the newspaper. Physicians are very deficient."

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