

# THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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OPINION > GUEST OPINION

## Dr. Umair A. Shah: Find your apple: improving health and wellness for all of Washington state

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**By Dr. Umair A. Shah**

Recently, life expectancy in the United States saw a decline for the first time since the 1920s for Americans.

This may not come as a surprise to you as we have gone through a tremendously difficult time over the past several years.

Indeed, the pandemic has undoubtedly had its impact, but other reasons for this decline can be attributed to injuries, drug overdoses and heart disease, to name a few. While we know life expectancy is only one of the health measures, it is an important one.

Combined with worsening life expectancy across age groups – including for younger to middle-age adults – this decrease should be a wake-up call for all of us.

It certainly got my attention as both a physician and this great state's secretary of health. It also concerns me as a neighbor, community member, father and husband. Decreases in life expectancy, coupled with the knowledge that preventive action on the individual level can increase not only our life expectancy, but also our health, wellness, and overall quality of life, led our agency to develop the Be Well WA initiative.

Health and wellness impact all of us intimately. When we are healthy and feel well, we tend to do better in school and work, and even in our relationships. There is no doubt that our health is the byproduct of many inputs, some biological and genetic, but many are both individually behavioral and social in nature.

The past several years have been difficult. We have witnessed a severe global pandemic unfold, violence impacting our communities, and less time to spend on the very thing that keeps all of us productive and happy: our health.

In August 2022, our agency launched the landmark Transformational Plan: A Vision for Health in Washington State, with five transformational priorities. The first of these priorities, Health & Wellness, contends that our health and wellness must be invested in, intentional and sustained.

In our field, we also know that what we do individually is impacted by and in turn impacts what surrounds us collectively. That's why just shy of two years after releasing the Transformational Plan, we recently launched our signature Be Well WA initiative with a simple but ambitious goal: to help everyone in Washington live healthy lives and make positive changes in our everyday activities, our families and our communities.

We believe that well-being is for everyone, no matter your age, budget, ability or time constraints. And that is why this initiative focuses on four pillars – 1) movement; 2) nourishment (including sleep, oral intake, and hydration); 3) emotional well-being; and, 4) social connection – through daily, actionable tips for individuals and tools for strengthening the health and wellness of specific communities with reliance on key and diverse partnerships from across our state.

While it may appear this is just another health initiative, Be Well WA is different in that it is the only initiative aimed at improving the health and well-being of all Washingtonians, no matter where they live, what they look like, or what their circumstance.

Be Well WA is for our entire state, with nearly 8 million people spread over some 70,000 square miles of beautiful and diverse expanse. From Spokane to Seattle, from Walla Walla to Whatcom. From communities tied to mountains to manufacturing, from forests to fruit markets. Together, we are an amazing state, one that believes in health, the power of community and the importance of each other.

At BeWellWA.org, you can find strategies and activities to help all of us live healthier lives. We are reaching out to partners in the public and private sectors alike, in education and parks, sports, and health care, to ask for their support in moving this initiative forward. Our motto is simple, “Find Your Apple” every day.

Many of these partners joined us as we launched the initiative in downtown Seattle recently. Investing in our health is not just a function of government or the individual. It is not about one part of our community or corner of our state. We all have a critical part to play.

While we believe in a systems approach to nurturing good health, we know that each of us has a part to play in moving more, nourishing ourselves better, caring for our emotional needs, and our relations and connections with each other.

I hope you will take the opportunity to join us as part of Be Well WA and “Find Your Apple” every single day – which is something all of us across Washington can get behind.

Umair A. Shah is secretary of health for Washington state.

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