



Department of Health

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Dear Colleagues,

This electronic newsletter marks a new orientation, a new attitude, and some new directions, for your Rhode Island Department of Health.

The Rhode Island Department of Health has always been charged with the responsibility of protecting the health and safety of Rhode Islanders, and has always discharged that responsibility with real vigor, making us a national leader, both historically and in the present day. Immunization programs, food and water safety, infectious disease outbreak epidemiology and control, providing nutrition and nutrition information to children, maintaining a world class public health laboratory, occupational and environmental health, control of chronic disease, and addressing the social determinates of health so we can reduce the impact of social disparities on health of Rhode Islanders—those are just a few of the more than 100 programs we administer.

In addition, we license and regulate health professions and facilities, which allows us to protect the health and safety of Rhode Islanders while we ensure the integrity of professional practice, an integrity which is always under assault by the marketplace and by outliers among facilities and the professions, outliers who confuse their self-interest with their professional obligation to put patient care first.

But the Rhode Island Department of Health can't do the work of public health alone.

All of professional practice has a public purpose. That public purpose—equalizing life chances so that we extend the lives of all Rhode Islanders, providing health care at a cost Rhode Islanders can afford, helping people stay healthy enough to work and learn, and helping us all to stay healthy enough to maintain our rich community life—is most effectively discharged by a partnership, a collaboration, between the department and the whole practicing community, which are this department's boots on the ground, and are the unsung heroes of public health. You identify disease outbreaks and patterns of disease in the community. You immunize Rhode Islanders. You screen for and manage chronic disease. You treat, prevent and counsel. And you advocate for better services, for fairness in the availability of services, and for social policies that, because they level the social playing field, help prevent disease and disability.

Our new orientation is to more explicitly recognize the partnership we have worked with all these years, and to build on that partnership. Yes, we will continue to regulate the health professions, and to license and discipline with renewed rigor, because that rigor brings integrity to the practice of medicine as a profession. But we will also communicate, using approaches like this newsletter, so that everyone understands the rules of an always changing road, and so that you have a better understanding of professional conduct as we understand it. Being clear about our expectation is part of collaboration, and I hope you will see even more clarity in our communications than you have in the past.

Our new approach comes out of a recognition of the power of collaboration. Recently, we had to close the Whitmarsh STD clinic, which had been operated for many years with incredible commitment by the Providence Community Health Centers, because of declining utilization, and because our funding has been cut in many areas. I would like to think that some of the decline in utilization happened because the primary care and infectious disease communities have become more comfortable taking a sexual history, and even more skilled at treating sexually transmitted disease. Many people and organizations have stepped to the plate to fill this gap; we have provided new resources, and are developing a new ability to provide professional education and backup for the primary care and emergency medicine communities, so that we can together do a better job at preventing, screening for, and treating all sexually transmitted diseases. This is a model for what we can do together. Expect to see us direct more resources to the practicing primary care community, and expand what we can do together.

Our new directions focus on winnable battles. Expect to see us focus on eliminating HIV transmission in Rhode Island, and then really starting to work on Hepatitis C. Expect to see a robust commitment to food and nutrition, so we can together prevent diabetes and heart disease. Expect to see us direct your attention to prescription drug overdose deaths and to prescription drug abuse, which is causing significant injury to Rhode Islanders. And expect to see us deeply involved with developing a health services delivery system that matters, a health services delivery system that provides affordable health services to all Rhode Islanders equally.

Thank you for all you do. I'm looking forward to all we can do together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Fine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael Fine, MD
Director of Health