

LETTER FROM THE HEALTH OFFICER

The past century has seen amazing increases in both life expectancy and health-related quality of life in the United States. Many major causes are well known, such as improved sanitation and hygiene, immunizations, antibiotics, chlorination of drinking water, refrigeration of food, pasteurization, and fluoridation of drinking water. As recently as 1900, infectious diseases were responsible for the bulk of human deaths (as they still are, in the developing world); nowadays, with infectious diseases substantially controlled, most Americans live to a ripe old age, and the major causes of death are the diseases of aging — cancer and heart disease. And our ripe old age is far more likely than in the past to include better physical mobility, less pain, and even our own teeth. But, if we don't get adequate exercise and eat a healthy diet, there's a greater chance that our old age will be marked by diseases such as diabetes and arthritis that can severely impair the quality of life.

Santa Cruz County residents are blessed, primarily through our own choices, with better health in many respects than other Californians and other Americans. We don't smoke as much, we exercise more, and we eat a healthier diet than many Americans. As a result, we have lower rates of heart disease, diabetes, lung cancer, and chronic lower pulmonary disease. We also have relatively low rates of tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, teen births, and homicide. On the other hand, we have elevated rates of Alzheimer's disease, suicides, and drug-related deaths; and, while our obesity and diabetes and STD rates may be relatively low, they are climbing dramatically here as well as elsewhere. While teen birth rates continue to plummet, both here and nationwide, they remain far higher than in almost all other developed countries, indicating that there is still plenty of room for improvement.

The Public Health Division of the Santa Cruz Health Services Agency is in the initial stages of applying for Public Health Accreditation. Public Health Accreditation is the measurement of health department performance against a set of nationally recognized, evidenced-based standards. Accreditation will help us to remain current on public health practice, enhance our reputation with the community, and provide us with an opportunity to identify areas where quality improvement is needed. It will also facilitate Public Health to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness at a time when local health departments are being asked to do more with less.

Multiple assessments and plans must be completed before we can apply for accreditation. This Health Profile is designed to complement and support this process. It is part of the Community Health Assessment (CHA), which is an essential component of the first phase of the accreditation. The CHA will identify our top health priority areas and will be performed with community involvement. This report addresses many important topics, but it is not intended to be comprehensive of all aspects of health; the CHA will provide that greater breadth and depth, including a much more thorough examination of the socioeconomic determinants of health and the health disparities that stem from them. This report is a snapshot of where we stand today — along with some “movies” showing where the trends are taking us.

I am very excited about accreditation and the positive changes that will arise from the process. We live in a beautiful and engaged community with a health department that is effective and involved. I anticipate that our community and the services we provide will evolve through the process.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the County Board of Supervisors, CAO Susan Mauriello, Health Services Agency Director Giang Nguyen, and the staff of the Agency for their interest and unwavering support.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa B. Hernandez', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lisa B. Hernandez, MD, MPH
Health Officer, County of Santa Cruz