

MEDICAL

'Stupid Reasons People Die' urges screenings

By Markian Hawryluk
The Bulletin

If ever there was a book that you shouldn't judge by its cover, Dr. John Corso's "Stupid Reasons People Die" is probably it.

After all, there are no examples of people swimming with alligators or lighting a match to check how much fuel is left inside a gasoline can. On the contrary, the stupid reasons, described in the Bend internist's new book, kill some of the most rational, level-headed people in the country.

In the book published just last month, Corso argues that there are only a handful of diseases that account for the vast majority of early deaths in the United States.



Dr. John Corso will sign copies of his book, "Stupid Reasons People Die," Saturday at 5 p.m. at The Book Barn, 135 N.W. Minnesota Ave., in Bend.

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Corso

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And for many of those big killers, there are tests to identify the risks and treatments to help manage them. Not using those because we're too busy or too scared is a stupid reason to die.

Consider that each year, heart attacks and strokes account for one-third of the deaths among Americans ages 35 to 74. Cancers kill another third. Lung disease, mainly due to smoking, kills 5 percent, and diabetes, another 3.5 percent. The remaining quarter of deaths encompass every other reason — from violent crimes to circus accidents.

Yet most people treat the causes of that first 75 percent as something beyond their control. Not so, says Corso.

Heart scans and blood tests can identify the real risk of heart disease and medications can help prevent heart attacks and strokes. Colonoscopies, mammograms and other imaging tests can find cancers in their early, treatable stages.

Still only a small percentage of people take advantage of those proven strategies. The first half of his book takes a sometimes humorous, oftentimes mind-boggling look at why. Part of it is human nature.

"Human beings are reactive and not proactive, especially when somebody is asking you to look for something you absolutely do not want to find," he says. But it's more than simply an unwillingness to look.

Individuals today rely on their doctors to tell them what tests they need. With the time constraints of primary practice and the pressure from insurance companies not to adopt emerging technologies until they have been widely used, doctors wind up practicing what Corso calls "the standard of care." Rather than adopting cutting edge technologies proven effective at saving



Dr. John Corso, a Bend internist, makes the case for taking charge of your own health in his new book "Stupid Reasons People Die."

Pete Erickson
The Bulletin

lives, the health care system plods along adopting screening techniques five or 10 years behind the curve.

"We have a third-party payer system in this country that exists primarily for profit for itself, which I'm not mad at; it just doesn't align itself with what I'm trying to do here," he says. "It tries to do a good job, but it's also very conservative in implementing new technologies for prevention until they've been proven. And the only way to prove them beyond a shadow of a doubt is for many people to die in the mean time."

His answer is for patients to pay for the state-of-the-art preventive care themselves.

"It's \$200 to \$400 a year for everything I'm suggesting," he says. "Prevention and screening is cheap. If you find a problem, it's expensive. And that's where insurance kicks in."

The second half of the book focuses on the specific tests Corso recommends. For example, Corso is a strong believer in electron-beam CAT scans, also known as EBT scans, for heart screening.

The standard of care now is to measure a person's risk factors, including blood pressure, cholesterol levels and family history. Those are great at predicting the prevalence of heart problems in a group of individuals with those risk factors. But they're less accurate at determining whether a single person sitting in the doctor's office will have a heart attack or not.

The EBT scans, on the other hand, can provide a direct view of the calcium deposits in coronary arteries, allowing a cardiologist to determine exactly what's causing those deposits and how best to address the problem.

Isn't that worth the \$99 to \$250 price tag, Corso asks.

At the same time, he admits, the approach is not for everybody. Screening comes with its own risks.

"You open up a Pandora's box in many cases," Corso says. "If we're going to look under a bunch of rocks, we're going to find a lot of unknowns and we have to manage them, and not react to them."

That could mean waiting up to a year to repeat the test before finding out whether the anomaly is a cause for concern or not. Some patients just aren't capable of living with that kind of uncertainty.

But if you can handle a little anxiety, the potential to defuse the "metabolic time bombs" is worth the cost and the risk, he says.

The idea for the book started back in 1997, when Corso was invited to talk about preventive health at the Bend Senior Center. After finishing his presentation, which he titled "Dumb Reasons To Die," an elderly gentleman approached him. "You need to write a book," he told him. "It's how you explained things that was really worth it."

A few weeks later Corso began to write.

Corso says he also was prompted to write the book by a phenomenon that surprised him when he moved north to Bend. In California, everyone was always eager for the latest medication, the new breakthrough drug. But

in Oregon, things were quite the opposite.

"It was a battle because this idea, that all medicines were toxic and anything that grew in the backyard was safe, was stunning to me," he says. "You don't understand. You've got diabetes. You're going to go blind and then we're going to cut your legs off and then you're going to go on dialysis and then you're going to die if you don't do this."

Still, his patients resisted the "unnatural" medication.

"What I found was that I had to sit down and, one by one, share at least my point of view and dispel a lot of myths," he says. "That's what really got me writing."

The book is aimed primarily at the baby boomer generation, which, he says, has come to expect to live a long and healthy life.

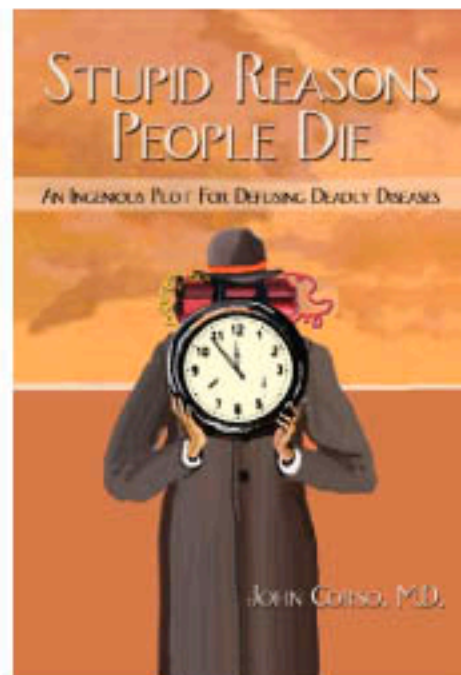
"They're very interested in doing what they can to preserve and maintain their health," he says. Younger individuals can use the book to help inform their parents, but most of the screenings in the book don't make sense until people are at least in their 40s.

As the science evolves, so will Corso's recommendations. Even though the book was just released March 15, he has already added another test to his suggested list and posted it on his Web site, www.stupidreasonspeople.com. He plans to continue to update the site as new evidence emerges.

While many people may balk at paying for the tests themselves, Corso says it's a matter of priorities.

"You can do everything in my book for the price of my coffee," he says, referring to what he spends on coffee in a year. "It's very doable for 80 percent of Americans."

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