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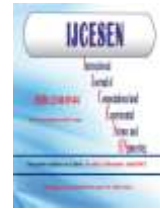

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Research Article

Collaborative Roles of Physicians, Nurses, and Nutritionists in Lifestyle Counseling and Chronic Disease Risk Reduction in Primary Care Clinics

Alshammari, Jazzaa Hammad M[1]*, Aseel Basheer Shayush Alshammari[2], Ahmed Saad Nazal Alanazi[3], Nouf Ayed Ayash Alenezi[4], Alanazi, Abdulmajeed Khulaif M[5], Osama Ibrahim Mohammed Alonayzan[6], Meshal Shulayyl Bader Alharbi[7], Badriah Sayyar Alruwaili[8], Tahani Ahmed Aldera[9], Fahdah Khalaf H Alhazmi[10], Alonazi, Fahad Mohammed F[11]

[1]Senior Registrar – Family Medicine, Rafha Diabetes and Endocrine Center, Rafha General Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Rafha, Northern Borders Region, Saudi Arabia
* **Corresponding Author Email:** dr.jh@hotmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-0007-785X

[2]Senior Registrar – Family Medicine, Quality Department, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Hail, Hail Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: mashailba@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-1017-785X

[3]Family Medicine Registrar Physician – Primary Health Care Center – Northern Borders Health Cluster – Ministry of Health – Arar – Northern Borders Region – Saudi Arabia
Email: ahmad.sn996@gmail.com- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-2027-785X

[4]General Practitioner – Maternity and Children Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: Noayalenezi@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-3037-785X

[5]General Practitioner – Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaed Hospital, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: aalanazi510@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-4047-785X

[6]Clinical Nutrition Specialist – Hail General Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Hail, Hail Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: Oalonayzan@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-6057-785X

[7]Clinical Nutrition Specialist – Ministry of Health, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Samira, Hail Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: Meshalalharbi32@gmail.com - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-7067-785X

[8]Nursing Technician – Al-Rafiah Primary Health Care Center, Al-Jouf Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Sakaka, Al-Jouf Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: bsalrwaily@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-8077-785X

[9]Nursing Technician – East Primary Health Care Center, Al-Jouf Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Dumat Al-Jandal, Al-Jouf Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: taldera@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-9087-785X

[10]Nursing Technician – South Al-Faisaliyah Primary Health Care Center, Northern Borders Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Arar, Northern Borders Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: fakalhazmi@moh.gov.sa - **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5097-785X

[11]Clinical Nutrition Specialist (Clinical Dietitian) – King Khalid Hospital, Hail Health Cluster, Ministry of Health, Hail, Hail Region, Saudi Arabia
Email: fAL-Onazi@moh.gov.sa- **ORCID:** 0000-0002-5107-785X

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Abstract:

In confronting the escalating global epidemic of chronic non-communicable diseases, primary care clinics have emerged as critical arenas for prevention, necessitating a decisive shift from a physician-centric, reactive model to a proactive, team-based paradigm. This collaborative approach strategically harnesses the distinct and complementary expertise of physicians, nurses, and nutritionists to deliver effective lifestyle counseling. The physician acts as the essential initiator and medical integrator, diagnosing risk, providing authoritative advice, and coordinating the overall care plan. The nurse serves as the holistic counselor and continuity champion, employing motivational interviewing and self-management support to empower patients over time. The nutritionist contributes specialized expertise as the dietary scientist, translating evidence-based medical nutrition therapy into practical, personalized eating strategies. Their synergistic collaboration, facilitated through structured models like the Chronic Care Model and enhanced by shared decision-making, creates a seamless support system that addresses the biological, behavioral, and social determinants of health. This interdisciplinary triad is proven to yield superior patient outcomes, including improved clinical biomarkers, enhanced patient satisfaction, and more sustainable health behavior changes, thereby positioning the primary care team as a powerful force for chronic disease risk reduction and long-term health creation.

1. Introduction

The global burden of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, chronic respiratory diseases, and certain cancers, represents one of the most formidable public health challenges of the 21st century. These conditions are responsible for approximately 74% of all deaths worldwide, with a significant proportion occurring prematurely in low- and middle-income countries [1]. The epidemiological transition, characterized by aging populations and shifting lifestyle patterns, has placed unprecedented strain on healthcare systems, economies, and societal well-being. While genetic predispositions play a role, the primary drivers of this pandemic are modifiable lifestyle factors: unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and harmful consumption of alcohol [2]. These behaviors contribute to intermediate physiological risks like hypertension, dyslipidemia, hyperglycemia, and obesity, which are the direct precursors to chronic disease morbidity and mortality.

In this context, the prevention and management of chronic diseases have moved to the forefront of healthcare policy and clinical practice. The traditional biomedical model, which is predominantly reactive, episodic, and focused on acute care and pharmacotherapy, has proven inadequate and economically unsustainable for addressing long-term conditions rooted in daily habits and social determinants of health [3]. A paradigm shift toward a proactive, preventive, and patient-centered model is not just preferable but essential. This new model prioritizes health promotion and early intervention, aiming to identify individuals at risk and support them in making sustainable lifestyle changes long before pharmacological intervention becomes necessary.

Primary care clinics sit at the crucial nexus of this preventive endeavor. As the first point of contact with the healthcare system for most individuals, primary care is uniquely positioned to deliver continuous, comprehensive, and coordinated care. It offers the longitudinal relationships and community context necessary for effective lifestyle counseling and chronic disease prevention [4]. However, the reality within many primary care settings is one of significant constraints. Physicians, who are traditionally viewed as the central authority in patient care, often face immense time pressures during brief consultations. The competing demands of diagnosing acute illnesses, managing complex chronic conditions, addressing polypharmacy, and completing administrative tasks leave scant room for in-depth discussions about nutrition, physical activity, or behavioral change [5]. Furthermore, while physicians are expertly trained in pathophysiology and pharmacology, their formal education in nutrition science, motivational interviewing, and behavioral change techniques is frequently limited.

This gap between the profound need for lifestyle intervention and the practical limitations of physician-only care underscores the critical importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. No single profession possesses all the knowledge, skills, and time required to effectively address the multifactorial nature of lifestyle-related chronic diseases. A synergistic team-based approach, leveraging the distinct and complementary expertise of physicians, nurses, and nutritionists (dietitians), presents the most promising strategy to deliver high-quality, effective, and sustainable lifestyle counseling within primary care [6]. This

collaborative model moves beyond mere referral to a true integration of roles, where each professional contributes their unique competencies toward a shared patient goal. The physician provides diagnostic authority, medical management, and overall care coordination. The nurse offers continuity, holistic assessment, and ongoing support and monitoring. The nutritionist delivers specialized, evidence-based dietary assessment and counseling. Together, they form a cohesive unit capable of addressing the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of health behavior change.
The evidence base supporting such team-based care is robust and growing. Research consistently demonstrates that interventions delivered by multidisciplinary teams are more effective than usual care in improving clinical outcomes, such as glycemic control in diabetes, blood pressure in hypertension, and lipid profiles [7]. Moreover, these models are associated with higher patient satisfaction, improved adherence to treatment plans, and, in many cases, reduced healthcare costs through decreased hospitalizations and complications [8].

2. The Physician's Role: Diagnostician, Initiator, and Medical Integrator

The physician in the primary care clinic serves as the foundational pillar of the healthcare team, with responsibilities that extend far beyond prescribing medication. In the realm of lifestyle counseling and chronic disease prevention, the physician's role is multifaceted, encompassing identification, initiation, integration, and leadership.
Firstly, the physician acts as the principal diagnostician and risk assessor. Through routine history-taking, physical examinations, and the interpretation of diagnostic tests, the physician is uniquely qualified to identify patients at elevated risk for chronic diseases. This involves calculating cardiovascular risk scores, diagnosing conditions like pre-diabetes or the metabolic syndrome, and recognizing the health implications of obesity [9]. The physician's authority lends critical weight to the message that lifestyle change is not merely a suggestion but a medical necessity. The "teachable moment" — such as following a new diagnosis of hypertension or hyperlipidemia — is often most effectively seized by the physician, who can directly link the patient's biomedical results to their daily habits, thereby enhancing motivation and perceived relevance [10].
Secondly, the physician is the essential initiator of the lifestyle intervention process. During the clinical encounter, the physician performs a brief behavioral assessment, often using frameworks like the "5 A's" (Ask, Advise, Assess, Assist, Arrange). After asking about lifestyle behaviors and advising change clearly and personally, the physician's key collaborative action is to **arrange**follow-up by formally referring the patient to other team members [11]. This referral is not a dismissal of responsibility but a strategic delegation to professionals with more specialized skills and time. The physician's explicit endorsement of the nurse or nutritionist reinforces their importance and encourages patient engagement with these services.
Thirdly, the physician functions as the medical integrator and care coordinator. Lifestyle interventions do not exist in a vacuum; they interact with a patient's overall medical plan. The physician must integrate lifestyle goals with pharmacological management, adjusting medications (e.g., reducing antihypertensive doses as weight loss and exercise lower blood pressure) in a careful, monitored fashion [12]. They oversee the holistic care plan, ensuring that recommendations from all team members are congruent and medically appropriate, especially for patients with multiple comorbidities or complex drug regimens. The physician also monitors for contraindications to certain lifestyle changes (e.g., uncontrolled heart failure before initiating intense exercise) and ensures patient safety throughout the intervention process.
Finally, the physician provides leadership and champions the team-based culture within the clinic. By modeling collaborative behavior, actively communicating with nurses and nutritionists, and valuing their contributions, the physician helps break down hierarchical barriers and fosters an environment of mutual respect [13]. This leadership is crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of any collaborative care model.

3. The Nurse's Role: Holistic Counselor, Continuity Champion, and Empowerer

Nurses, particularly nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and practice nurses in primary care, are the linchpins of continuity and holistic support. Their role is characterized by longitudinal relationships, a whole-person perspective, and expertise in patient education and self-management support.
A core function of the primary care nurse is to conduct more detailed and holistic assessments of a patient's readiness for change, barriers to healthy living, and social determinants of health. While the physician may identify the medical risk, the nurse often has the time and rapport to explore the "why" behind the behavior. They assess psychosocial factors, family dynamics, financial constraints, cultural beliefs about food, environmental barriers to physical activity, and levels of health literacy

[14]. This comprehensive understanding is indispensable for tailoring interventions that are realistic and meaningful for the individual patient, moving beyond generic advice to personalized strategy.Building on this assessment, nurses excel in providing ongoing counseling and coaching. They are skilled in employing patient-centered communication techniques and behavioral change theories, such as Motivational Interviewing (MI). MI, a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change, is highly effective in resolving ambivalence and strengthening a patient's own motivation for change [15]. Nurses can use MI principles in follow-up visits or telephone consultations to help patients explore their values, set their own goals, and develop confidence in their ability to change. This approach empowers patients, fostering intrinsic motivation rather than imposing external compliance.Furthermore, nurses are the champions of self-management education and support. They teach practical skills: how to monitor blood pressure or blood glucose at home, how to read food labels, how to plan meals, and how to incorporate physical activity into a daily routine [16]. They help patients develop problem-solving skills to overcome obstacles, such as finding healthy options when eating out or exercising in bad weather. This empowerment is critical for long-term sustainability, as patients transition from passive recipients of care to active managers of their own health.Finally, the nurse ensures vital continuity of care and serves as a key communication bridge within the team. They often see patients more frequently than physicians, allowing for regular monitoring of progress, early identification of setbacks, and timely adjustment of plans. They communicate patient updates, challenges, and successes to both the physician and the nutritionist, ensuring all team members are aligned [17]. This persistent, supportive presence makes the nurse an accessible and trusted figure, central to maintaining patient engagement over the long and often non-linear journey of lifestyle modification.

4. The Nutritionist's Role: Dietary Scientist, Personalized Food Strategist, and Behavior Specialist

The registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) brings a deep, evidence-based expertise in the science of food and nutrition that is unparalleled within the primary care team. Their role translates complex nutritional biochemistry into practical, actionable eating strategies tailored to the individual's medical condition, preferences, and lifestyle.

The foundation of the nutritionist's work is a comprehensive and detailed dietary assessment. This goes far beyond a simple recall of fruit and vegetable intake. It involves analyzing dietary patterns, nutrient adequacy, eating behaviors, timing of meals, cooking skills, food security, and the relationship the patient has with food [18]. Using tools like 24-hour recalls, food frequency questionnaires, or food diaries, the nutritionist can identify specific areas for intervention, such as excessive sodium, saturated fat, or added sugar intake, or inadequate fiber consumption.

Based on this assessment, the nutritionist develops a highly individualized and medical nutrition therapy (MNT) plan. MNT is an evidence-based application of nutrition counseling provided by an RDN to treat conditions like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity [19]. For a patient with type 2 diabetes, this involves creating a carbohydrate distribution plan that manages postprandial glucose. For a patient with heart failure, it focuses on strict sodium and fluid management. For weight management, it constructs a sustainable calorie-controlled diet that preserves lean mass and promotes satiety. This level of specificity is beyond the standard scope of practice for physicians and nurses and is critical for achieving targeted metabolic outcomes.A significant part of the nutritionist's skill set is translating nutritional science into practical, real-world application. They provide hands-on education on topics like portion control, mindful eating, grocery shopping strategies, healthy cooking methods, and recipe modification [20]. They help patients navigate social situations, holidays, and travel while staying aligned with their health goals. This practical guidance bridges the gap between knowing what to eat and actually being able to do so consistently in everyday life.Moreover, nutritionists are trained in behavioral change strategies specific to eating behaviors. They address cognitive distortions around food, work on restructuring the home food environment, and help patients build skills like meal prepping and planning [21]. By understanding the psychological and emotional components of eating, they can address issues such as emotional eating or disordered eating patterns, providing support that complements the broader behavioral coaching of the nurse.

5. Synergistic Collaboration: The Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

The true power of this triad lies not in the isolated work of each professional, but in their intentional, structured collaboration. Synergy is achieved when

their roles interconnect, creating a seamless, wraparound support system for the patient.

The collaborative process typically follows a logical sequence initiated by the physician. After identifying risk and providing brief advice, the physician makes a warm handoff or formal referral to both the nurse and the nutritionist, clearly communicating the medical priorities (e.g., "This patient has new-onset pre-diabetes; priority is weight loss of 5% and increased physical activity") [22]. The nurse then conducts the holistic assessment, builds rapport, and begins motivational work, preparing the patient for the more specialized dietary intervention. Simultaneously or subsequently, the nutritionist performs the in-depth dietary assessment and crafts the personalized MNT plan. Crucially, the nurse and nutritionist maintain continuous communication. The nurse can reinforce the nutritionist's dietary advice during follow-up coaching sessions, while the nutritionist can alert the nurse to psychosocial barriers (e.g., financial hardship affecting food choices) that emerged during their consultations [23].

Regular interdisciplinary team meetings, whether formal or informal (e.g., huddles), are the engine of this collaboration. In these forums, the physician, nurse, and nutritionist discuss shared patients, review progress toward goals, troubleshoot challenges, and adjust the care plan collaboratively [24]. The physician shares relevant medical updates, the nurse reports on behavioral progress and adherence, and the nutritionist provides data on dietary changes. This shared decision-making ensures consistency of messaging to the patient and allows for agile modifications to the intervention. For instance, if a patient is struggling to adhere to a dietary plan due to depression, the team can collectively decide to prioritize addressing the mood issue while temporarily simplifying nutrition goals.This model creates a powerful feedback loop of reinforcement for the patient. They receive consistent, non-contradictory messages about their health from multiple trusted sources, which strengthens the credibility of the advice. The patient feels surrounded by a supportive team, reducing the likelihood of falling through the cracks. Studies demonstrate that such integrated care models lead to superior outcomes compared to fragmented care or single-provider interventions, including greater improvements in clinical biomarkers, higher patient satisfaction, and more efficient use of healthcare resources [25].

6. Models and Frameworks for Implementing Collaborative Care

Implementing effective collaboration requires deliberate structuring. Several established models and frameworks can guide the integration of physicians, nurses, and nutritionists in primary care. The Chronic Care Model (CCM) is one of the most influential frameworks for improving chronic illness care. It emphasizes the importance of a prepared, proactive practice team working within a supportive healthcare organization [26]. Key elements relevant to lifestyle counseling include **Self-Management Support** (the collective work of the team to empower the patient), **Delivery System Design** (explicitly defining roles and creating protocols for teamwork and follow-up), and **Decision Support** (ensuring the team has access to and training in evidence-based guidelines for lifestyle management). Embedding the nurse and nutritionist within the care delivery system is a direct application of the CCM.

The Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH) is a specific primary care model that operationalizes principles of the CCM. It is founded on comprehensive, patient-centered, coordinated care facilitated by information technology and a team-based approach [27]. In a PCMH, the physician-led team, which explicitly includes nurses and often nutritionists, is responsible for the patient's whole-person care across settings. Reimbursement structures in some regions support PCMH recognition, providing financial incentives for the coordinated, preventive care that this team delivers.

Practical implementation often involves specific protocols. A **stepped-care** approach can be efficient, where the physician provides the initial brief intervention, the nurse delivers the first line of more intensive counseling, and the nutritionist is consulted for more complex or refractory cases [28]. **Shared medical appointments** or group visits are another innovative model where a physician, nurse, and nutritionist co-facilitate sessions for a group of patients with similar conditions (e.g., diabetes). This leverages peer support and makes efficient use of professional time while providing multidisciplinary input [29].

The use of **shared care plans** and interoperable electronic health records (EHRs) is a critical technological facilitator. A shared digital plan, accessible and editable by all team members, ensures everyone is aware of the patient's goals, the strategies being employed, and their progress. Secure messaging within the EHR enhances asynchronous communication [30]. Furthermore, the integration of **pre-visit planning**—where nurses or medical assistants screen patients and flag lifestyle issues before the physician encounter—can streamline the referral process and ensure no opportunity for counseling is missed.

7. Challenges and Barriers to Effective Collaboration

Despite the compelling rationale, significant barriers impede the widespread and effective implementation of collaborative lifestyle counseling in primary care.

Financial and reimbursement structures pose the most formidable obstacle. In many fee-for-service healthcare systems, physician visits and procedural codes are reimbursed at much higher rates than counseling services provided by nurses or nutritionists [31]. Often, nutrition services are not covered by public or private insurance plans, placing the cost burden directly on patients. Even when covered, requirements for physician supervision or specific diagnostic codes can create administrative hurdles. Without sustainable financing models that value preventive, time-intensive counseling, practices struggle to justify the salary costs of integrated nurses and nutritionists.

Workforce shortages and uneven distribution of professionals, especially registered dietitian nutritionists, are a major constraint. Many primary care clinics, particularly in rural or underserved areas, simply do not have access to an on-site or even a shared nutritionist [32]. High patient volumes and existing staffing shortages among nurses also limit their capacity to take on expanded counseling roles, leading to burnout and role overload.

Professional culture and entrenched hierarchies within healthcare can hinder teamwork. The historical model of physician-led, siloed practice can lead to resistance to role sharing or a lack of understanding and respect for the distinct expertise of other professions [33]. Nurses and nutritionists may feel their recommendations are not valued or acted upon by physicians, while physicians may feel their autonomy or authority is being challenged. Building a true culture of collaboration requires intentional effort, leadership, and interprofessional education.

Operational and logistical challenges are also prevalent. Lack of physical space for confidential counseling, insufficient time for team meetings or communication, and poorly designed EHRs that do not facilitate information sharing all disrupt workflow [34]. Without clear protocols defining referral pathways, communication channels, and scope of practice boundaries, collaboration can become chaotic and inefficient.

Finally, variable levels of patient readiness and engagement present a constant challenge. Even the most expertly designed team intervention will fail if the patient is not motivated or faces overwhelming social determinants of health, such as poverty, lack of access to healthy food (food deserts), or unsafe neighborhoods for physical activity [35]. The team must be skilled not only in clinical intervention but also in resource navigation and advocacy to help address these foundational barriers.

8. Future Directions and Recommendations for Optimization

To realize the full potential of the physician-nurse-nutritionist triad, systemic changes and innovative approaches are necessary.

Payment reform is paramount. Healthcare payers must transition from volume-based to value-based reimbursement models that incentivize prevention, outcomes, and team-based care [36]. Creating specific billing codes for interdisciplinary chronic disease prevention visits, expanding insurance coverage for medical nutrition therapy delivered by RDNs, and providing capitated or bundled payments for managing patient populations can create the financial sustainability required for clinics to invest in their care teams.

Expanding the workforce and enhancing training is crucial. This includes increasing the pipeline of RDNs and promoting policies that place them in primary care settings. For all professions, interprofessional education (IPE) should begin at the undergraduate and graduate levels, fostering mutual respect and teaching collaborative practice competencies before entering the clinic [37]. Ongoing training in shared frameworks like the 5 A’s and Motivational Interviewing for the entire team ensures a common language and approach.

Leveraging technology for augmentation and extension offers great promise. Digital health tools—such as secure patient portals for messaging the care team, mobile apps for dietary tracking and goal setting, wearable devices for monitoring physical activity, and even asynchronous telehealth consultations with nutritionists—can extend the reach and impact of the in-person team [38]. These tools provide continuous touchpoints and data, allowing the human team to focus on interpretation, support, and high-level coaching. Artificial intelligence could eventually assist in risk stratification, flagging high-risk patients for the team’s attention.

Advocating for policy and environmental changes beyond the clinic walls is essential. Healthcare teams should engage in community partnerships, supporting local food initiatives, safe walking paths, and worksite wellness programs [39]. They can also advocate for broader public health policies, such as sugar-sweetened beverage taxes or

improved food labeling, which create environments that make healthy choices easier for their patients.

Finally, a commitment to continuous quality improvement and research is needed. Clinics should monitor process measures (e.g., referral rates to nutritionists) and outcome measures (e.g., changes in patient HbA1c or weight) to refine their collaborative models [40]. Further research should focus on the cost-effectiveness of specific team configurations, the optimal intensity of interventions for different risk groups, and strategies for engaging hard-to-reach populations in collaborative care [41].

9. Conclusion

The escalating global burden of lifestyle-driven chronic diseases demands a fundamental rethinking of care delivery in primary care clinics. The traditional, physician-centric model is insufficient to provide the intensive, nuanced, and sustained support required for effective lifestyle modification and chronic disease risk reduction. A collaborative, team-based approach that strategically integrates the complementary expertise of physicians, nurses, and nutritionists offers a far more powerful and effective solution.

The physician, as diagnostician and care coordinator, identifies risk and initiates the intervention. The nurse, as holistic counselor and continuity champion, provides ongoing coaching and self-management support. The nutritionist, as dietary scientist and food strategist, delivers the specialized medical nutrition therapy essential for metabolic change. When these roles are intentionally aligned through clear protocols, open communication, and shared goals, their synergy creates a comprehensive support system that addresses the biomedical, behavioral, and psychosocial facets of health.

Overcoming the significant barriers of financing, workforce, culture, and logistics requires concerted effort at practice, health system, and policy levels. The future of effective chronic disease prevention lies in valuing and investing in this interdisciplinary team. By embracing collaborative models, leveraging technology, and advocating for supportive environments, primary care can transform from a site of disease management to the true engine of health creation, empowering individuals and communities to live longer, healthier lives.

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