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## Editorial: Unhealthy health plan

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You'd better sit down. This isn't good news.

On second thought, don't sit. You're doing too much of that already.

A newly released report card on the health of North Carolinians says we eat too much and exercise too little.

We as a group tend to be more obese than the national average. The rate of obesity among young people here is the fifth-worst in the country.

And we die two years sooner than the average American.

Small wonder we didn't make the Dean's List in the annual report card issued last week by N.C. Prevention Partners, which has tracked the state's collective well-being since 1998.

So a revamped State Health Plan that charges lower premiums for healthier employees would be a good thing, right?

Not exactly.

The revisions to the plan were added to legislation recently passed by the state House and Senate that keeps the program afloat.

There might be good intentions tucked amid all the nonsense in this bill. But they're not easy to find.

The plan, which affects 667,000 North Carolinians, emphasizes punishment over rewards and will be difficult, if not downright impossible, to administer.

The plan essentially places the burden on the employee to provide evidence that he or she and every family member are not overweight and do not smoke.

Here's how it works: All current state workers automatically will be enrolled in what is called the "basic plan," which charges the higher premium.

They will have to prove that they deserve to be reclassified into the less-expensive tier, called the "standard plan."

Effective in 2010, the plan will banish every member of an insured family into the more expensive plan if even one family member smokes.

If someone dares to sneak a cigarette after being enrolled in the cheaper plan or dares to lie about a smoking habit, there will be consequences.

The state will conduct random blood tests as well as smoking tests with a device called a "Smokerlyzer."

Effective in 2011, the plan will similarly penalize with the higher rates those found to have higher body mass indexes than the state allows.

What defines being overweight, according to the state? We don't know yet. It will be based on a "range determined by the Plan," the legislation says.

The problem isn't the principle. The state is right to incorporate wellness incentives into health coverage for its work force. Too often, health care has focused too much on treating illnesses rather than preventing them.

Another rationale for the revised plan was to save money, but even its cost-effectiveness remains open to question.

This plan is invasive, cumbersome and impractical, and it prefers the stick to the carrot. It is not only excessive, it is ridiculous.

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