

Virtual Mentor

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VIEWPOINT

David Satcher, MD, PhD, US Surgeon General

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Satcher was one of 9 children born to poor, self-educated farmers who supported their family on less than \$10,000 a year. At the age of 2 he nearly died of whooping cough because the vaccine to combat the illness was not available in rural Alabama. He survived to become one of only 3 students in his high school to go to college and was the first African American to earn a combined MD-PhD from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in 1970. He began his medical career in Los Angeles, where he directed a sickle-cell program and opened a free clinic in a Watts church basement. He was the chairman of Morehouse School of Medicine's community medicine department before serving as president of Meharry Medical College in Nashville for more than a decade. At various times throughout his practice he treated the sick and injured in the underserved areas of Cleveland and in the immigrant communities of New York.

Since becoming the nation's leading spokesman on public health matters, Dr. Satcher's agenda can be summarized by his rallying cry, "to make public health work like it's never worked before." In addition to his priorities of establishing a balanced community health system and maintaining a global approach to public health, one of Dr. Satcher's top goals is to address and eliminate disparities in health.

According to Dr. Satcher, "Compelling evidence that race and ethnicity correlate with persistent, and often increasing, health disparities among US populations demands national attention. Indeed, despite notable progress in the overall health of the Nation, there are continuing disparities in the burden of illness and death experienced by blacks, Hispanics, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Pacific Islanders, compared to the US population as a whole. The demographic changes that are anticipated over the next decade magnify the importance of addressing disparities in health status . . . therefore, the future health of America as a whole will be influenced substantially by our success in improving the health of these racial and ethnic minorities."

Citing the Initiative on Race and Health unveiled by President Clinton in February 1998, Dr. Satcher has set the goal of eliminating racial disparities in health by the year 2010. Despite advances in medicine, significant disparities are apparent between racial groups in this country. Under Dr. Satcher's watch, the Office of the Surgeon General has made a priority of eliminating—not just reducing—disparities

for minority populations in the areas of infant mortality, child and adult immunizations, HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular disease, cancer screening and management, and diabetes.

For his commitment to the health of all Americans and his willingness to take a stand as a physician in the political arena to shape health policy, we are proud to name Dr. David Satcher a role model in medicine.

Karen Geraghty is a fellow in the AMA Ethics Standards Group.

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