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A guide to the Rochester area



Thursday, September 16, 2004

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Health race gap persists

Know cultural differences, urges Satcher

Michael Wentzel
Staff writer

(September 16, 2004) — To eliminate disparities in health, the Rochester community and the United States will have to do more than improve access to health care, a former U.S. surgeon general said Wednesday.

To succeed means paying attention to the environment in which people live and work, said Dr. David Satcher, keynote speaker at the Diversity2004 conference at the Rochester Riverside Convention Center.

It means making sure that research discoveries reach all those who need new treatments. It means understanding cultural differences.

"Culture counts in how a patient manifests and describes an illness," said Satcher, who served as surgeon general from 1998 to 2002. "Culture counts in how they cope with an illness and whether they are willing to seek treatment."

Satcher spoke on the third and final day of the conference sponsored by the Greater Rochester Diversity Council that brought 400 people to the convention center to discuss a wide range of diversity issues. A special session on health care was held Wednesday.

"Disparities in health are very real," said James H. Norman, president of Action for a Better Community. "Many conditions and disparities documented 20 years ago are the same today."



MAX SCHULTE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. David Satcher, former surgeon general, gives the keynote address Wednesday at the Diversity2004 Conference at Riverside Convention Center. Disparities in health care caused by income and race must be addressed, he says.

[Day in Photos]



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The overall rate of mortality from heart disease, cancer and diabetes for all groups in the Rochester region, for example, has declined by 20 percent since 1980, according to a study released last year by the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency.

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But the death rate in the black community remains the same.

Less than half of local African-American women — 47 percent — receive early prenatal care, compared with 76 percent of local white women.

The disparities are caused by issues of income, race, access to care or limits to the relationship between the patient and provider because of language and cultural conflicts, Norman said.

"And people are not getting the care they need," he said.

National studies show that 45 million Americans lack health insurance and that many are underinsured.

"The increase in the number of people without insurance is a major setback to eliminating the disparities of health," Satcher said. "While health care insurance is critical, it is not the only part needed to eliminate disparities of health."

Poor environmental quality causes 25 percent of preventable illnesses worldwide, he said. But quality is about more than air or water pollution.

"People need a safe environment for walking and physical activity," Satcher said. "It is very difficult to get people to change to a healthy lifestyle when they don't feel they have a future."

The health care system also needs to deliver research discoveries "to the curbside and the countryside," not just to hospitals.

A doctor can't provide quality health care without an understanding of a patient's language and culture, Satcher said.

"Americans value diversity and if you value diversity, you cannot be comfortable with the fact that people are not benefiting equally from health care," Satcher said.

The Monroe Plan for Health Care, which provides services to low-income residents in the region, works with providers on cultural competency.

"You don't want to advise a Mexican diet to a patient who comes from Puerto Rico," said Robert Thompson, the Monroe Plan's president.

The Monroe Plan also is working with the lifestyle of patients.

In some doctor's offices and clinics in the northeast neighborhoods of Rochester, for example, more than 30 percent of patients were failing to keep their appointments.

But an effort to give patients access to a doctor the day they call has

reduced no-shows to 5 percent, Thompson said.

"This opens up the practice to the community and when it opens up, you can introduce more things," Thompson said.

MWENTZEL@DemocratandChronicle.com



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