

Clinton Announces Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Initiative

By Jennifer Brooks

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President Clinton is serious about improving the health of our nation. During a February 21, 1998 radio address, President Clinton announced the launching of a new Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Initiative. “By the year 2010, we must eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in infant mortality, diabetes, cancer screening and management, heart disease, AIDS, and immunization,” he said. President Clinton backed up his words by devoting an unprecedented \$400 million from his balanced budget plan to promising prevention and outreach programs that help minorities and other disadvantaged populations. The President also plans to give health insurance to five million more children and increase overall medical research.

“Americans are living longer and are in better health than ever before,” President Clinton said. “But we must not be blind to the alarming fact that too many Americans do not share in the fruits of our progress, and nowhere are the divisions of race and ethnicity more sharply drawn than in the health of our people,” he said.

President Clinton points to gaps in health statistics as reasons for stepping up efforts to improve health care: Infant mortality rates are twice as high for African Americans as for white Americans. African American men suffer from heart disease at nearly twice the rate of whites. African Americans are more likely to die from breast cancer and prostate cancer. Overall, cancer fatalities are disproportionately high among both Latinos and Blacks. And Hispanic rates for diabetes are twice the national average; Native American rates are three times the national average. The President also said Asian Americans suffer from hepatitis B in greater numbers than other groups. Vietnamese women are five times as likely to have cervical cancer; Chinese Americans four to five times as likely to have liver cancer.

“We do not know all the reasons for these disturbing gaps,” said President Clinton. “Perhaps inadequate education, disproportionate poverty, discrimination in the delivery of health services, cultural differences are all contributing factors.”

Despite the reason, “racial and ethnic disparities in health are unacceptable in a country that values equality and equal opportunity

for all,” President Clinton said. “And that is why we must act now with a comprehensive initiative that focuses on health care and prevention for racial and ethnic minorities.”

President Clinton called on top public health officials, led by Secretary Donna Shalala, to convene a task force to find new ways of targeting existing federal programs that reduce these health disparities. He also announced that David Satcher, MD, our new Surgeon General, will launch a comprehensive campaign to educate the public and work with community leaders and health professionals to reach more Americans.

The President also announced that Grantmakers in Health (GIH), a major coalition of over 136 philanthropic foundations across the country, is joining these efforts. Together, HHS and GIH will host a national conference this spring “to help solve this national problem, community by community,” President Clinton said.

“But to truly eliminate these disparities and ensure better health for all Americans, all Americans must do their part,” President Clinton said. He urged Americans to take more responsibility for their own health and the health of our children.

Over the last six years, the Clinton Administration has placed more emphasis on prevention and on making health care more accessible and affordable. His approach seems to be leading to progress in some areas. “Infant mortality has reached an all-time low, childhood immunization levels are at an all-time high and AIDS death rates are falling for the first time in the history of the epidemic,” said President Clinton.

However, research shows that overall, minority groups are less likely to be immunized against disease, less likely to be routinely tested for cancer, and are less likely to get regular check-ups.

“America has the best health care system in the world,” President Clinton said. “But we can’t take full pride in that system until we know that every American has the best health care in the world. With these steps, I’m confident that we can meet the challenge and go forward as one America into the 21st century—stronger and healthier than ever before.” ❖

*“...an important step
we’re taking to make sure
all Americans, no matter
what their background,
have a better opportunity
to live healthier lives.”*

