

Healthy People 2010: What Can We Do to Shape the Objectives?

By Clay E. Simpson, Jr., MSPH, PhD
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Minority Health
Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
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How many times have we wondered: Can I really make a difference? Can one person's voice have an impact on health improvement for millions of Americans? The answer is a definitive yes.

Healthy People 2010 is a framework that enables us to work together as government and community leaders, health practitioners, educators, and concerned citizens. We've envisioned a society where health care is accessible to all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender or socioeconomic status. We'd like to lower the rates of diabetes, heart disease, and AIDS across the board, not just for certain segments of our population. We'd like to see all Americans take advantage of breakthrough drug therapies, immunizations and other preventive medicine in increasing numbers. We can no longer accept lower health status and a lower standard of care for a part of our population. But we can only achieve this vision with your help and your strong support.

Why should you care about the Healthy People 2010 initiative? Because it is your future and your children's future at stake; because when we say "healthy people" we're talking about *you*. And, it is a personal issue for me because too many people think we can't resolve these disparities. We even find health professionals and policymakers who still believe—from what they were taught in school years ago—these racial disparities in health are simply a matter of genetics. My response to them is: look at access to care, behavioral factors, education, poverty and racism. Those are the underlying causes. Let's set the record straight. Now is our opportunity to play an active role in shaping the future of this nation's health agenda—we must take advantage of it.

On November 12-13, 1998 in Washington, D.C., HHS's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion will sponsor a Healthy People Consortium meeting for public comment on the draft Healthy People 2010 document. HHS regional offices will also host regional meetings on Healthy People 2010 between October and December 1998.

The draft document, to be released in September, will detail a set of 500 measurable and development objectives that we plan to work toward achieving by the year 2010. I urge you to take a stand for your health and your community's health by participating in one form or another during this public comment period.

HHS has established work groups for each Healthy People focus area. Individuals as well as community organizations are encouraged to assist lead agencies within HHS that have been designated to convene specific work groups.

In a country that has demonstrated a commitment to seriously improving its health care systems, too many Americans are still plagued by treatable and preventable diseases and conditions—particularly minorities and other disadvantaged populations. Heart disease, HIV, infant mortality, diabetes are damaging our communities to a staggering degree.

As we approach the new millennium and see the world around us changing, it is time to respond. People are living longer; we're now seeing the number of racial and ethnic minorities rising steadily; the elderly population is on its way to being the largest age group in the nation; and medical technology is exploding. We must prepare ourselves for these changes—today!

The Healthy People 2010 objectives are being developed with the understanding that we can not improve the health of all Americans unless we bring up those who lag behind. President Clinton's Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities is at the very foundation of the Healthy People 2010 framework. That is our priority here at the Office of Minority Health—closing the gap in illness and death between minorities and other U.S. populations, and improving access to health care.

In examining written public comments on Healthy People 2010 last Fall, I was disappointed and discouraged by the lack of participation from our minority communities. I urge you to lend your expertise and concern for your community by commenting on the Healthy People 2010 draft this year. Let us know that you support the goal of eliminating health disparities. Read Valerie Welsh's article on page 3 and let us know how you think targets should be set. Make your voice count! Public comments will be accepted between September 15 and December 15, 1998.

I also encourage everyone—from community and faith organizations, to schools and businesses—to use the Healthy People 2010 framework to guide their health promotion efforts in their communities. The framework for the Healthy People 2010 initiative is in the public domain and can be retrieved on the Web site.

Limited free copies of the Healthy People 2010 objectives will be available at the Office of Minority Health Resource Center by calling 1-800-444-6472. ❖

