Opening Remarks
Steven M. Teutsch, M.D., M.P.H.

DR. TEUTSCH: It is a great privilege for me to follow Reed as chair of this Committee. I can't echo enough Rick's words about what it is like to follow Reed. Under his leadership this Committee has made great strides in addressing many of the important issues that we face in the field of genetics.

It is a daunting task to follow someone with Reed's vision, his leadership, his generosity of spirit, and extraordinary clarity of focus, and still a man who has a great sense of humor.

I have a terrible memory for names, so that may be one place where, Reed, I can emulate you.

[Laughter.]

DR. TEUTSCH: I first heard you speak, and frankly, I don't remember whether it was 15 or 25 years ago, when you gave a great speech at a Healthy People introduction to the country. I said, I need to follow that man. I guess now I get my chance.

[Laughter.]

DR. TEUTSCH: It has been a singular treat for me to work with you here on SACGHS. I want you to know that you actually are not being liberated. Sarah gave me your phone number, and I will be calling.

We all know that the field of genomics is at a transformational crossroads. The Human Genome Project has opened vast new vistas. We have new technologies that have yielded important advances in basic science and have provided us great new tools for breakthroughs and innovations, for risk assessment, diagnosis, new therapies, and prevention.

When I was in medical school, which was the last time I studied genetics, frankly, genetics was a basic science in the study of rare conditions. At that time, that was a pretty specialized subject. We are clearly at a juncture where it is no longer just about tragic, uncommon diseases but about common, chronic conditions: diabetes, heart disease, cancer, arthritis. It is about complex genetics and interactions with the environment.

I think our task in large measure is to help create an environment that stimulates research and innovation, helps us understand the value of new technologies, that facilitates the appropriate use of those technologies, and helps the healthcare system function effectively and efficiently. And perhaps most importantly, to improve the health of the American people.

At the same time, we must assure access to those technologies and fairness in their distribution. We need to make sure that there are appropriate protections for individuals and their families and that an educated population can understand the real opportunities and not be daunted by the high and unrealistic hopes.

I am reminded of what T.S. Eliot wrote probably close to a century ago. Where is the wisdom that we have lost to knowledge, and where is the knowledge that we have lost to information? We will have lots of information and lots of data, and our task is to help people make good choices.

We are facing brave new paradigms and challenges. The $1,000 genome will put incredible volumes of information in the hands of clinicians and patients. How can we make sure that that information is tapped and targeted and used well. How do we avoid harm from information overload or misinformation. How do we build effective information and clinical support systems. Most importantly, how do we protect the public from harms.

Vaccines aside, virtually no healthcare technology really saves money. Indeed new technologies are one of the major drivers of increasing cost in our healthcare system. As the cost of health care rises inexorably and we face budget constraints, how do we make intelligent choices about the opportunities before us.

I also recognize, of course, that the field of genetics has many, many stakeholders, more than I realized when I joined this Committee two years ago. We need to listen carefully to all of them. They have important things to tell us.

Our real purpose, though, is not in meeting the needs of individual stakeholders but in improving the health of Americans. I'm constantly reminded that remembering that simple fact keeps me grounded, focused, and motivated.

While we are ultimately accountable to the American people, our primary audience is the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Our job is to provide him with wise guidance and counsel so that he can manage and lead the HHS agencies, seek appropriate resources, and recommend legislation.

As most of you know, my field is public health and health policy, not really genetics. This Committee is blessed with an incredibly talented group of people with deep knowledge and experience in many aspects of genetic health and health care, healthcare policy, and personal experience with genetic conditions. It is that richness which gives me tremendous optimism that we can build on the legacy of SACGHS to make even greater contributions.

Our liaisons bring not only their personal knowledge and experience but a direct line into the workings of their organizations, the opportunities and the challenge that each of those organizations face. We need to be responsive to their needs as well as those of the Secretary. I look forward to working with each of you and engaging you fully into the work of the Committee.

Finally, as you all know, we have an extraordinarily talented and devoted staff, who I trust will not only keep me on the straight and narrow but will continue to maintain the Committee's productivity.

We have lots of work before us. We will spend the end of the day brainstorming about needs and priorities. In the end, though, all is for naught if our reports aren't used. Our job is not done when our reports are complete. We all know important work that we have been involved with that only serves to keep bookshelves well anchored. We will need to follow through on our recommendations to assure that they are implemented, to continue to work with the Secretary and the agencies to make sure that the recommendations are translated into reality.