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Surgeon General's Column

We have witnessed a great deal of progress in public health and medicine since our Nation first embarked on the national planning process for the Healthy People initiative. The process began in 1979 with *Healthy People: The Surgeon General's Report on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention*, which was followed in 1990 by *Healthy People 2000*. *Healthy People 2010* represents the third time the Department of Health and Human Services has developed health objectives for the Nation. The initiative has withstood four presidential administrations and has enjoyed bipartisan support and we expect that it will continue to thrive in the future.

I have reported earlier that we are nearly a year into our ambitious *Healthy People* initiative and the momentum for the goals—to enhance the quality and years of healthy life and to eliminate disparities in health—is steadily building. Supporting those two goals are a voluminous set of objectives for the American people to rally around, 467 in all. We see this as both an opportunity and a challenge. It's an opportunity because having more objectives allows for more *Healthy People* involvement throughout the Nation. It's a challenge because there is no way we could effectively communicate that many objectives to the average person. We hope the newly added 10 Leading Health Indicators will change that. They were developed with assistance from the Institute of Medicine, based on their ability to motivate action, the availability of data to measure their progress, and their relevance as broad public health issues. The indicators reflect personal behaviors, factors in the physical

and social environment, and systemic issues that greatly affect the health of individuals and communities. They can be divided into two groups of five.

Lifestyle Indicators

These represent some of the most important challenges facing public health today, but also some of the best opportunities we have for shaping a better future.

- **Tobacco use** is the leading preventable cause of death in the United States today, resulting in nearly half a million deaths each year. This is especially alarming considering that, with all we know about the harmful effects of tobacco, 3,000 teenagers become new smokers every day. Our goal is to cut the smoking rate in half by the year 2010.
- **Physical activity** is another serious lifestyle challenge confronting the Nation. In fact, more than 300,000 deaths each year are attributable to physical inactivity and dietary factors. The many dangers of physical inactivity include increased risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and colon cancer. We recommend at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day, at least 5 days a week, along with a healthy diet of grains and at least five daily servings of fruits and vegetables. In 1997, 64 percent of adolescents, and only 15 percent of adults, engaged in the recommended amount of physical activity. In the same year, 40 percent of adults engaged in *no* leisure-time physical activity.
- **Overweight and obesity**, which are exacerbated by physical inactivity and

poor diets, are steadily rising in both children and adults, resulting in serious health risks. Overweight and obesity among adults have increased by around 50 percent; in children, the increase is as much as 100 percent. In concert with these increases is an increase in the rate of diabetes in the United States. In fact, we are seeing increasing incidences of Type 2 diabetes, formerly known as adult onset diabetes, in children as young as 10 years of age. This was nearly unheard of just a decade ago.

- **Substance abuse** includes abuse of alcohol and use of illicit drugs. It is important to note that the drug of choice, especially among college students, is alcohol. That is not to say that we are not concerned about illicit drugs, but when 40 percent to 50 percent of college students binge drink—have more than five drinks in one sitting, at least twice a month—we must take notice. It means they drink to get drunk, increasing their risk of developing alcohol-related diseases, and putting themselves and others at increased risk for motor vehicle crashes, irresponsible sexual behavior, and violence—not to mention poor academic performance.

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Surgeon General's Column

- **Responsible sexual behavior** involves both remaining abstinent until in a committed relationship, and protecting oneself and others against disease and unwanted pregnancy when sexually active. Irresponsible sexual behavior can be deadly. The AIDS pandemic is worse than anything we have seen since the plague of the 14th century or the influenza epidemic of 1918.

Health Systems Indicators

- **Mental health** issues remain problematic in this country. Over the last 25 years, we have witnessed a scientific revolution in our understanding of mental health and mental illness that has resulted in a vast array of safe and effective treatment options. Still, as the landmark December 1999 *Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health* notes, one in five people experiences a mental disorder, but because of stigma and shame, too few seek the help that is available. As a forerunner to the Mental Health Report, we published the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent Suicide*, which outlines the need for a national strategy to treat depression and other mental health problems.
- **Immunization**, one of the most effective public health interventions to date, is an area of concern for both children and adults. While we have come a long way with regard to children's immunizations, there are still great disparities among adult immunization rates. Although 67 percent of white older adults reported influenza vaccination in 1997, only 50 percent of African American seniors, and 58 percent of elderly Hispanics did so. Similarly, 47 percent of white senior citizens reported receiving pneumococcal vaccine, but only 30 percent of African Americans and 34 percent of Hispanics reported receiving it.
- **Violence and injury prevention**, including homicides, suicides, and crashes, are particularly critical among young people. We plan to release a *Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence Prevention* in the near future.
- **Environmental quality**, a term covering both physical and social envi-

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ronment, is another area of increasing concern. There is a clear need to address such social-environment issues as work-related stress, injury, violence, housing, transportation, and urban development. African American and Hispanic children are at increased risk from their geographic environment as well. They are much more likely than white children to grow up near hazardous waste sites, for example. In fact, although minorities constitute only about 25 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise 40 percent of the people living within 2 miles of hazardous waste sites, and an even greater percentage are minority children. In addition, the rate of asthma and asthmatic attacks are major concerns for minority children.

- **Access to care** is the final health systems indicator. We need a community health system that balances health promotion, disease prevention, early detection, and availability of high-quality health services for all. Our health system has disproportionately punished the poor and minorities and those who serve them. We must find ways to ensure that cost, quality, and accessibility—as well as other socioeconomic issues, such as education and housing—do not serve as barriers to quality care. In addition, we must ensure that we have a diverse pool of physicians who are culturally competent and available to serve.

All of the indicators are designed to support the Healthy People 2010 goals of increasing the quality and years of healthy life and eliminating health disparities based on race and ethnicity. For each indicator, specific objectives from Healthy People 2010 will be used to track progress and, through national and State-level report cards, recognize achievements and remaining challenges. Developing strategies and action plans to address one or more of these indicators can have a profound effect on increasing the quality of life and the years of healthy life and on eliminating health disparities—creating the next generation of healthy people in healthy communities.

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CDR Terry J. Schleisman Receives PHS Meritorious Service Medal with Valor

CDR Terry J. Schleisman, an optometrist serving with the Indian Health Service (IHS), was recently awarded the Public Health Service (PHS) Meritorious Service Medal with Valor for his heroic action that prevented the drowning deaths of three youngsters, ages 8, 10, and 12.

While serving in Kotzebue, Alaska, with the IHS, CDR Schleisman was on a bike trip on the evening of August 30, 1998. He was returning to Kotzebue from a 1½ mile trip up to Cemetery Road. This road goes out of Kotzebue into the tundra and is infrequently traveled. As CDR Schleisman was returning to town, coming up to the farthest bridge from town, he saw approximately 10 frantic people screaming, "Help them, help them, they can't swim!" This bridge spans a channel approximately 20 to 30 feet deep that has been dredged to allow boats access to and from the Kotzebue Sound from the Arctic Ocean. There are no safety devices or ropes available in this area to assist with a water rescue.

As CDR Schleisman was pedaling up to the bridge, he saw three children struggling in the water in the channel beneath the bridge. None of the children could swim and they were caught in the strong undertow and cross currents that flow through the channel.

When told that none of the children could swim, CDR Schleisman quickly removed his shirt and shoes. He then jumped into the deep, cold, 50-degree water. The youngest child had gone under water at least twice and was going under again when CDR Schleisman reached him. CDR Schleisman grabbed the child and swam with him back to shore. CDR Schleisman then went back into the channel to rescue the 10-year-old child. Because of CDR Schleisman's actions and example, a bystander with very limited swimming ability was inspired to wade into the water and encourage the oldest child to struggle closer to shore where the wader could reach him.

CDR Schleisman acted without regard to his personal safety by risking hypothermia and the possibility that he would be swept out into the Arctic Ocean during the rescue effort. His clear headed actions were instrumental in preventing a tragedy that surely would have resulted in the drowning deaths of these three children. His performance represents the most cherished tradition of the PHS and reflects great credit upon himself and the PHS.

