

Experts promote scientific literacy during health care conference

With the Terri Schiavo case still fresh in the public's collective mind, Furman hosted a timely conference April 18-20 on "Health Policy in the United States."

The conference, sponsored by the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Service, featured such experts as Louis Sullivan, former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Joseph J. Fins, chief of the Division of Medical Ethics in the Departments of Public Health and Medicine at Weill Medical College of Cornell University. Fins was widely quoted by the national media about the Schiavo case. Other experts on the program included Robert Lawrence of the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, and Furman trustee Angela Walker Franklin '81, vice dean and associate vice president for academic and student affairs at Morehouse School of Medicine.

Sullivan and Fins were the conference's headliners, and in their opening and closing addresses, respectively, each emphasized the need for an educated public in dealing with health care issues.

"Health is too important to leave it only to health professionals," Sullivan said in his talk on "Diversity and Health Care Delivery Outcomes." "If we want

to advance we need an informed citizenry that has an important role to play in decision making."

Sullivan also pointed out that, although great strides have been made in recent years, the United States still needs to find ways to encourage more minorities to enter health care fields. Currently, he said, minorities make up less than 10 percent of nurses, physicians and dentists.

Such low numbers can affect both the nature and the quality of care: "Minority providers are more likely to serve minority and low income areas, where we need providers the most."

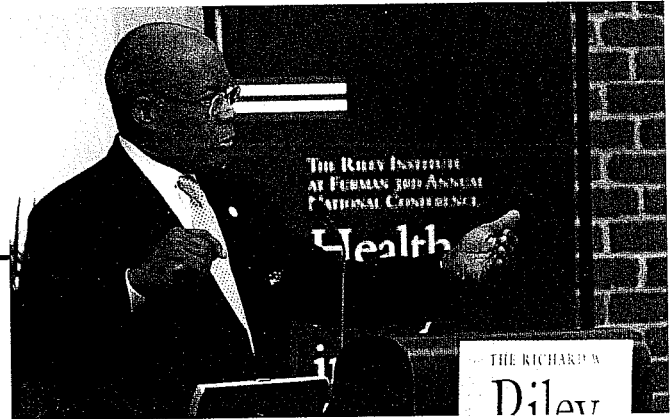
To help boost the numbers, Sullivan suggested that we need a new "culture of medical schools." "More minorities are enrolled in two-year colleges than four-year institutions. We have to develop a bridge program for these students into med school while also encouraging people to pursue second careers in medicine later in life."

Fins, whose topic was "Affirming the Right to Care and Preserving the Right to Die: Reflections on Schiavo," said that the Schiavo case demonstrated

the "importance of secondary and higher education to establishing scientific literacy in this country. Democracy needs education," he said — and not the type that you get from the Internet, which, he noted, is where many people acquired their "knowledge" of the Schiavo case.

He decried the prevalence of "long-distance diagnoses" in the Schiavo case, referring to so-called experts who issued opinions without having examined the patient. And he indicated his belief that Congress overstepped its bounds and the rule of law by intervening in the case and voting to allow a federal court to examine whether Schiavo's constitutional rights had been violated.

Fins devoted much of his talk to a clinical explanation of the differences between states of consciousness — and the difficulty doctors often have in distinguishing between vegetative and minimally conscious states. He concluded by reiterating that to make proper medical decisions, we need an informed citizenry that fully understands the potential choices and outcomes when acting on behalf of the critically ill.



Louis Sullivan, former Secretary of Health and Human Services, delivered the conference's opening address.