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Forum looks to even health score

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As experts ponder, minorities to gain knowledge on eliminating disparities

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Cancer, heart disease and AIDS can kill anyone, but they're even deadlier for minorities.

Black Americans, for example, are nine times as likely as whites to have HIV, and more likely to die of diabetes and breast cancer, too, according to the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. Black babies are twice as likely to die before their first birthday as white babies.

"The nation's minority populations have shorter life expectancies, higher death rates from cancer and stroke, and lower rates of immunization for children," said Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, former U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services under President George H.W. Bush.

"And these disparities not only hurt these populations," he said, "but the nation as a whole, because you have unnecessary expenditures and loss of productivity where people are impaired rather than contributing to the work force."

Sullivan is among the keynote speakers exploring "Health Policy in the United States" at a conference this week at Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute.

The three-day event brings together nationally known experts to ponder some of today's most difficult health-care issues.

Dr. Joseph J. Fins, chief of the division of medical ethics at Cornell University, will reflect on the ethical questions surrounding the Terri Schiavo case. Dr. Robert S. Lawrence, a professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, will speak on health as a human right.

Sullivan will tackle health-care disparities, which is among South Carolina's most pressing issues, too, said Dr. Saundra Glover, head of the Institute for Partnerships to Eliminate Health Disparities at the University of South Carolina's School of Public Health.

These disparities affect the state's overall well-being, she said. Students who don't get nutritious meals, for example, may not be able to perform up to par on in the classroom, leading to high dropout rates and low-paying, unsatisfying jobs.

"The whole social cost of health disparities are huge -- the economic issues, jobs, education, performance of our students," she said. "The equation has to encompass all those components to begin to reduce disparities."

The state has targeted six areas: cardiovascular health, diabetes, cancer, infant mortality, HIV/AIDS and immunizations, said Gardenia Ruff, director of DHEC's Office of Minority Health. Efforts will focus on community-based outreach and education, especially in rural areas, she said.

"It's a priority to eliminate health-care disparities in the state and improve health for all," Ruff said. "Reaching people in the communities where they work, live and play ... is the thrust of these approaches." Another way to tackle the disparities is to get more minorities into the health professions, said Sullivan, the

founding dean and president emeritus of the Morehouse School of Medicine.

While minorities make up a quarter of the nation's citizens -- and 30 percent of Palmetto State residents -- they constitute just 5 percent of doctors, 6 percent of dentists and 9 percent of nurses, he said.

Access to care is an important element of eliminating disparities, he said, and studies show that it is minority health care providers who are most likely to practice in underserved communities.

Those providers also are better equipped to relate to minority patients and their cultures, to communicate effectively, and develop mutual respect -- all important considerations because the science is the same, Sullivan said.

But despite advances over the past four decades, minorities are still underrepresented in the health professions," he said. "Reasons include the cost of medical education and the lack of role models. "We have seen some improvement, but it's been from something like 3 percent to 5 percent," he said.

"Many minority youngsters don't look upon being a doctor or dentist as a realistic career," he said.

"Part of the answer to having access to health-care professionals for people in minority populations is having minority physicians and other health-care providers."

CLOSING THE GAP

Minority resources online

+To get information on the health gap between minorities and whites in South Carolina, and to access information from the federal Office of Minority Health on AIDS initiatives and other diseases, in both English and Spanish, click on Local News and select Health at: GreenvilleOnline.com

Mug: Sullivan