

# DAVID SATCHER, MD, PHD

Recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award  
for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind 1999



Effective public health measures depend on effective public policy. Steps that promise to improve public health have to be developed with the interests of the communities in mind. This requires scientific knowledge, a willingness to take on controversial issues, and building consensus—a combination that, throughout his career, has characterized David Satcher, MD, PhD, this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind.

Culminating many years of distinguished service in medicine and public health, Dr. Satcher was sworn in as both the assistant secretary for health and the surgeon general of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in February 1998. He is only the second person to simultaneously hold both positions.

As assistant secretary for health, Dr. Satcher serves as the DHHS secretary's senior advisor on public health issues, and provides leadership on issues that involve the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS). The

surgeon general, often referred to as the "Nation's Doctor," uses the best available science as his defense in championing the nation's health issues before the public and the administration.

As the 16th surgeon general, Dr. Satcher oversees 50,000 employees and 6,000 members of the PHS Commissioned Corps—a uniform service whose mission is the same today as it was 200 years ago: to the extent that we provide for the health needs of the most vulnerable among us, we do the most to protect the health of the nation.

In these dual roles, Dr. Satcher has given priority to such major national health issues as ensuring every child has an opportunity for a healthy start in life, promoting healthy lifestyles, improving the nation's mental health system, strengthening support for an effective community health system, and increasing attention to global health.

Despite all of the medical breakthroughs in this country, we still see major gaps in health outcomes across racial groups.



That is why current within each one of Dr. Satcher's evolving priorities is the goal of eliminating racial disparities in health, which coincides with President Clinton's initiative to eliminate health disparities by 2010. This marks the first time in the history of our nation that we have made the commitment to eliminate, not just reduce, some of the health disparities between majority and minority populations. The following six areas have been targeted as starting points: cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, infant mortality, and immunizations.

Dr. Satcher's daughter, Gretchen, the oldest of his four children, says that his entire career had been a preparation for this job. Her father, she writes in an article in *San Jose's City Flight* magazine, "learned very early in life the importance of making the best health care readily available for all people. He has emphasized this, not only as a physician, but also as a researcher, educator, and administrator. His life has been a testament to the values he will continue to

instill in America's health care system."

In many ways Dr. Satcher is an example of the potential that exists in all of humankind, no matter what station we are handed in society. David Satcher was born in Alabama in 1941, the son of poor farmers. From his youth, Dr. Satcher knew he wanted to be a doctor. He graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1963, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He then went on to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland to study medicine. Graduating in 1970 with both a medical and doctoral degree, he was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Society.

In 1972, Dr. Satcher went to Los Angeles where he practiced family medicine at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital in Watts. He created a free clinic in his church's basement, making health care accessible to members of that underserved community. He developed and chaired the King-Drew University Department of Family Medicine; directed the King-Drew Sickle Cell Disease Center for six years; and from 1977 to 1979, served as the interim dean of the Charles R. Drew Postgraduate Medical School. While at this post, he negotiated the agreement with the School of Medicine, University of California Los Angeles that led to a medical education program at King-Drew.

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In 1979, Dr. Satcher returned to Atlanta to become chair of the Department of Community Medicine and Family Practice at Morehouse School of Medicine. In 1982, he became president of Meharry Medical College School of Medicine in Nashville, TN, a post he held until his appointment as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and administrator of the Toxic Substances Disease Registry in 1993.

He successfully spearheaded initiatives that markedly increased childhood immunization rates from 55 percent in 1992 to 78 percent in 1996. He also upgraded the nation's capability for responding to emerging infectious diseases and laid the groundwork for a new early warning system to detect and prevent food-borne illnesses.

Under Dr. Satcher's direction, the CDC's comprehensive breast and cervical cancer screening program increased from 18 to 50 states, five territories, and 15 American Indian reservations. In addition, the agency highlighted the importance of physical activity with the landmark *Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health*.

The CDC was originally formed to identify and control disease outbreaks. In recent years, the agency has been increasingly involved with developing disease prevention measures, such as the Childhood Immunization Initiative, smoking control

efforts, and accidental injury prevention, among others.

"Dr. Satcher is an exceptionally visionary leader and an extremely effective advocate for science-based public health policy and its applications. He has had a profound impact on CDC's mission and its programs," says James M. Hughes, MD, director of the National Center for Infectious Diseases at the CDC.

"He was a strong supporter of the concept of prevention research, recognizing the need to develop new information in support of effective implementation and evaluation of prevention programs with particular emphasis on the disadvantaged and underserved. He was a strong advocate for strengthening links between those in clinical medicine and those in public health," adds Dr. Hughes.

Dr. Satcher has been recognized for his skill at consensus building. "An important contribution was his developing and strengthening of partnerships," Dr. Hughes says. "This included not only the groups we traditionally work with but also a broad range of stakeholders including the corporate world, minority organizations, and the faith communities."

"Our goal is to make public health work like it never worked before. To do that, we must be willing to go out of our way to create new and innovative partnerships," Dr. Satcher states.



“One of his greatest strengths is his willingness to take controversial positions if he believes they are right,” says Walter Orenstein, MD, director of the CDC’s National Immunization Program. That can take courage, Dr. Orenstein points out, because it can bring one into conflict with some quite vocal groups.

“Dr. Satcher does his own investigation, works through the data, and comes up with his own conclusions before accepting change. He looks at the scientific evidence and on that he bases his decisions.”

This same principle lies behind his support of the controversial needle exchange program as a way of controlling HIV transmission. Dr. Satcher says he thinks the best available science will be accepted even if it is not always politically popular. “But you have to make the position clear, that you are talking both about the best available science and the concerns of the American people,” he says.

There were many other programs over which Dr. Satcher “stuck his neck out,” as

Dr. Orenstein puts it. He defended the Vaccines for Children program and the National Immunization Survey against congressional and interest group criticism. As a result of his steadfast support of such programs as the Childhood Immunization Initiative, about 90 percent of the nation’s children under two years of age have received their major vaccinations.

“He thinks globally,” says Dr. Huges. “He played an outstanding leadership role at the CDC in defining the threats posed by infectious diseases. He has a sustained commitment to educating policy makers and the public concerning the present and future challenges posed by infectious diseases and the important prevention opportunities that exist, recognizing the need to address these at the global level.”

In addition to surveying the food and blood supply and monitoring threats of bioterrorism, Dr. Satcher has identified four areas of global health concern: polio eradication, emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases, tobacco prevention and control, and violence. This attention has strengthened international prevention and research efforts in infectious diseases and strengthened collaboration with the World Health Organization, the United Nations AIDS Program, and the World Bank—all of which are necessary to protect people worldwide.

