

## Increase in minority health professionals to reduce disparities



Louis W. Sullivan, M.D.: 'If we are successful in increasing diversity, this will result in improved health status in the long run among our nation's minorities.'

A key factor contributing to health disparities between minority and white populations is the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the nation's health professionals, said Louis W. Sullivan, M.D., president emeritus, Morehouse School of Medicine, and former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (1989-1993).

Dr. Sullivan addressed the issue in "Implementing What Works for America's Health Care System and Access to Health Care" as part of the Sullivan Alliance Update at Monday's Roselyn Payne Epps, M.D., Breakfast Symposium.

"Having a more racially and ethnically diverse health professions workforce will enhance communication between health professionals and our nation's population," Dr. Sullivan said. "Improved communication between health professionals and the individuals they serve will foster trust and understanding that will influence health outcomes. If we are successful in increasing diversity, this will result in improved health status in the long run among our nation's minorities."

Currently, minority populations can expect shorter life expectancies and higher death rates from such conditions as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and diabetes. Dr. Sullivan said this disparity would only become more pronounced if the health professions continue in this racially and ethnically unbalanced mode as the nation's population grows. Projections are that by the year 2042, the nation's population will be much more racially and ethnically diverse and there will no longer be a white majority.

He shared his disappointment that efforts since the late 1960s to address the lack of diversity among the nation's health professionals have "only been partially helpful and not nearly as successful" as he and others involved had hoped. Moving forward, Dr. Sullivan proposes strategies for doing more to promote diversity in the health professions and in different arenas:

- Strengthen the K-12 educational system so youngsters can attain a stronger mastery of mathematics and sciences
- Offer better career counseling and mentoring so young people would view health professions as a viable,

attainable careers

- Bolster the ethnic and racial diversity of the nation's health professions faculties so these individuals can serve as role models
- Increase financial aid to provide poor students an opportunity to enter health professions
- Promote primary-care careers to minority health profession students because minority populations are in great need of primary care physicians.

"As it is currently constituted in so many of our urban areas, the school system really turns out students who are unprepared in mathematics or the sciences," Dr. Sullivan said. "Therefore, they start out already hampered in their ability to compete for admission to college and later to health professions schools."

Career counseling, particularly public schools in cities, is scarce or not available at all, he said.

"Equally bad is counseling that is misdirected or erroneous," Dr. Sullivan said. "Rather than supporting and encouraging students to prepare for, and anticipate, a health professions career, many are discouraged from viewing these as careers that are attainable to them."

Financial aid is an important strategy to help level the playing field. Students currently entering health professions, particularly in medicine and dentistry, come disproportionately from families in the upper-income brackets, he noted. Conversely, many poor students cannot pursue health careers for financial reasons.

Dr. Sullivan also addressed another major benefit of increasing the number of minority health professionals. They are likely to practice in communities where they are most needed. Black physicians and Hispanic physicians were three to five times more likely to establish their practices in medically underserved, minority communities. These physicians also served a higher percentage of patients in need, specifically Medicaid recipients or those with no medical insurance at all.

Additionally, the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, which monitors manpower issues, has projected that the population growth and implementation of health care reform will result in the need for more health professionals by the year 2025 —160,000 more physicians, 250,000 more public health professionals and 1 million more nurses.

"In addressing the nation's need for more health professionals, it gives us an opportunity to address the need for more diversity among health professionals," Dr. Sullivan said. "The ultimate purpose of all of this is to improve the health of our population, both for its own value as well as providing for a workforce that is more productive and makes our country and economy more competitive in the world. Diversity has its own intrinsic value, but it also contributes in many ways to making us a stronger nation. These are strong arguments for why we need do this."