

The Changing Challenges of Women's Health for Society and the Health Care System

In the last 30 years, the roles and socioeconomic conditions of women have changed significantly with regard to employment, education, and professional opportunities. The shifting demographic profiles of women have created a new awareness of their health needs. These needs far exceed what society traditionally has viewed as women's health issues.

Lung cancer has replaced breast cancer as the most common cause of cancer death among American women. The lung cancer rate is linked to increased cigarette smoking and the lack of an effective therapy.

Higher rates of heart disease among women and the resulting mortality are thought to be a result of higher levels of stress accompanying women's growing responsibilities at home and at work.

The problem of teenage pregnancy is of crisis-level proportions as a result of early maturation and changing sexual behavior attitudes. This problem has long-range adverse impacts on the individual teen-ager's education, independence, and later opportunities, as well as on the baby in terms of low birth weight and mortality.

Women are living longer. Their health care needs are increasingly complex with regard to long-term care, chronic disease management, and the demands on the caregiver who provides home health care to aged family members. To these problems add the need for more effective prevention and treatment of osteoporosis, incontinence, alcoholism, and medication abuse.

The responsibility for improving the status of women's health in the United States is shared among women, society as a whole, and all its institutions. Women today increasingly take a greater degree of personal responsibility for their own health. They are taking informed steps to improve their health by adopting behaviors proven effective in preventing disease and promoting wellness. These include better communication with their health care providers, informed and safer use

of medication, better nutrition with balanced diets, and active participation in health education programs.

Society and our social institutions, public and private, are responsible for raising the status of women's health. The needs are to improve the health care system, change attitudes toward women's health, and remove social and economic barriers to quality health care services and delivery. Research is needed on the serious, debilitating diseases which impact women, with the research results communicated freely to the public health community. We can develop more timely and understandable educational messages and programs to help women prevent disease and improve their well-being. Support networks within the community need to be encouraged and strengthened.

The National Conference on Women's Health was held in June 1986. It focused on the urgent women's health issues, providing a baseline of medical and scientific information on many aspects of these issues. The proceedings will soon be published as a special supplement to *Public Health Reports*, the journal of the Public Health Service. The presentations of the various recognized experts comprise a valuable contribution to the growing body of knowledge available to the public health community on women's health issues.

I regard the proceedings as the primary means for achieving the ultimate objective of the conference, which is to provide a resource and a stimulus for the development of educational messages and programs within local communities. Achieving that will realize the maximum benefits of our collective knowledge, and its application to the problems at hand and the work to be done.

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Advances in Indian Health Care

Three papers in this issue describe the Indian Health Service (IHS) and the people it serves. "The Organization of Health Services for Indian