

# Healthy People at 20

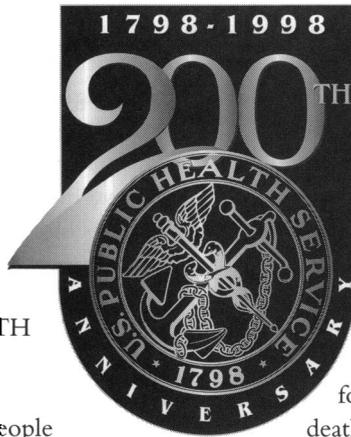
BY DAVID S. SATCHER, M.D., Ph.D  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR HEALTH  
AND U.S. SURGEON GENERAL

Since its inception in 1979, the Healthy People initiative has been a significant and innovative effort to improve the nation's health by setting national health goals for each decade and then annually reviewing the status of Americans with regard to those goals. Healthy People has moved this nation from simply assessing health status to projecting and forecasting what is possible to achieve through preventive interventions and proven clinical preventive services.

Through the use of goal statements, focus areas, and objectives, Healthy People has allowed us to identify and address disparities in health status and outcomes between population groups, and it has helped us recognize opportunities at the national, state, local, and community levels to address significant health issues.

Currently, all states and many localities use this framework to guide local policies and programs. Through partnerships with more than 600 private, state, and local organizations, Healthy People has tapped the resources, skills, and knowledge of community members, health care delivery systems, voluntary groups, and public- and private-sector organizations and agencies.

As the 20th century draws to a close, we have conducted the final annual review of the Healthy People 2000 goals, and I am pleased to report that it was the best annual review in



two decades. We found continued improvement in the health of Americans. The nation is on track to reach, or has already reached, the targets for more than half its health objectives.

Overall, we met the targets for 15% of the objectives by the end of 1998, including many in nutrition, maternal and child health, heart disease, and mental health. Targets to reduce outbreaks of waterborne diseases, foodborne infections, and oral and breast cancer deaths were also met.

For an additional 44% of the objectives, the nation was progressing on schedule toward the target by the end of 1998; these included child vaccinations, breastfeeding, regular dental visits, mammography screening, and consumption of five fruits and vegetables a day. For some objectives, such as reducing infant mortality, we were only a fraction away from the target.

But, while for nearly 60% of the objectives we have either met targets or are moving in the right direction, the report also showed that for a fifth of the Healthy People

objectives, we are moving away from the targets. For some key objectives, such as reducing the number of overweight individuals and increasing physical activity, we have seen either a move in the wrong direction or little progress. A prime example of this is diabetes, for which incidence, prevalence, complications and mortality are all on the rise.

Highlights of the report, *Healthy People 2000 Review, 1998-99*, grouped objectives by four life stages:

## **Infants and children.**

Infant mortality has declined steadily throughout the 1990s, and the death rate for children 1-14 years of age has dropped by 26% to surpass the objective. Substantial progress in reducing drowning and motor vehicle crash deaths and meeting the target for fire-related deaths



contributed to this success. Improvement in the overall mortality rates for infants and children from the inception of the initiative in 1979 to these new data is dramatic, with a 50% drop for infants and a 40% drop for children. However, hospitalization for asthma in children has been on the rise most of the past decade and is a major cause of morbidity.

**Adolescents and young adults.** For those 15–24 years of age, death rates have declined substantially to meet the important year 2000 target of 85 deaths per 100,000. Since the inception of the Healthy People initiative 20 years ago, the mortality rate for adolescents and young adults has dropped 26%. Alcohol-related motor vehicle crash deaths and suicides are down, helping to meet the objective. Students are now also less likely to engage in such risky behaviors as fighting and weapon carrying. On the other hand, after declining somewhat, heavy drinking among high school seniors has increased recently, and there has been little progress in reducing heavy drinking among college students.

**Adults.** The death rate for the 25–64 age group has declined steadily and is near the year 2000 target. Since the beginning of the initiative in 1979, the mortality rate has dropped 31% for this age group. Cancer death rates are now below the year 2000 target, due in great part to the drop in breast cancer and colorectal cancer death rates as well as a slowing of the rise in lung cancer death rates.

**Older adults.** Life expectancy rates are up, reflecting the continuing decline in deaths from heart disease and stroke; the reduction in mortality since the inception of the initiative is 6%. As Americans live longer, however, more people over 70 years of age are having difficulty performing critical functions such as dressing, bathing, or getting out of bed. Although the decrease in the suicide rate for white males—the group at greatest risk in this age category—has met the year 2000 target, rates for deaths resulting from falls and motor vehicle crashes have increased over the last decade.

In many ways, Americans of all ages and in every racial and ethnic group have better health today than a decade ago. Yet considerable disparities remain. We should commit our nation to eliminate disparities in the next decade, for through prevention we can improve the health of all Americans.

On January 25, 2000, I will launch Healthy People 2010, the nation's prevention agenda for the first decade of the new century, at the Partnerships for Health in the New Millennium conference in Washington, D.C. There will be some important differences between the 2010 goals and previous efforts.

Healthy People 2010 will address the scenarios and

trends of the upcoming decade, including a larger, more diverse, aging population, and a host of new health risks such as emerging infectious disease. The initiative has grown to 28 priority areas and more than 550 objectives. The two overarching focuses will be to: (1) increase quality and years of healthy life; and (2) eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities.

Disparities exist in a number of areas. For example, a black infant has more than twice the chance of dying in its first year of life as his or her white counterpart; Hispanic infants are one and a half times as likely to die as white infants.

We have had success in reducing disparities in many areas. But for the year 2010, we are changing the goal from that of reducing disparities to that of eliminating disparities. It is an ambitious goal, but one that is worth pursuing. In the process of eliminating these disparities, we will develop systems that will help everyone. This is not a zero-sum game. We don't have to take anything away from anybody to achieve these goals.

We will also release newly developed leading health indicators that focus on a small number of key health/social issues that can extend the reach of Healthy People to the public and business and opinion leaders. Earlier this year, we asked the Institute of Medicine to examine the use of such indicators, and the IOM found that "a small set of leading health indicators can create a national identity for the full-scale implementation of Healthy People 2010 and expand the traditional Healthy People community to include a wide variety of agencies, organizations, diverse population groups, community organizations, and individuals."

A host of new resources will be useful in planning for 2000 and beyond, including a Tool Kit that can help agencies and organizations adapt the initiative to their own needs. (See resources at <http://www.health.gov/partnerships>.) You can also e-mail <partnerships@health.org> to find out how to get on the conference LISTSERV or with any questions.

I encourage the public health community to take an active part in furthering the goals of the Healthy People 2010 initiative. More information on the most recent review and the upcoming launch of the 2010 goals are available on the Internet at <http://web.health.gov/healthypeople/>.

The Healthy People process helps focus action on common goals and enables diverse groups to combine their efforts. We can be proud of the progress we are making in public health as this decade, and this century, come to a close. But many challenges remain, and they form the foundation of Healthy People 2010. We must enter the new millennium as a team working together to improve the health of all Americans. ■