

Former U.S. Surgeon General Satcher Answers Health Questions

Dr. David Satcher knows a thing or two about Black health. He was president of historically Black, Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, before President Bill Clinton appointed him U.S. surgeon general, a job that Satcher held from 1998 to 2002. Satcher now directs the Satcher Health Leadership Institute at Atlanta's Morehouse School of Medicine. Some of Satcher's missions there are to develop a more diverse generation of public health leaders and to eliminate health-care disparities in the population. Though Dr. Satcher leads a fast-paced schedule, he took time to answer these questions from Message about health issues important to minorities.

Given that health is more than just the absence of disease, what are the main signs that tell a layperson that he or she is healthy?

Ultimately, I would recommend that a layperson see a physician periodically to access his or her health because of the danger of missing something that could be treatable or even preventable. However, it is fair to say that one's energy level is always a good indication of one's health, and I would say that when one does not have energy to perform tasks that he or she had been able to perform before, then there is a reason to be concerned about health. Even depression can zap the energy of the average person.

What is the most important health issue facing African Americans today, and what should individual African Americans do about it?

There are several important health issues facing African Americans today, and there are major disparities between the health of African Americans and the majority population in this country. Certainly being overweight or obese is a major public health concern for African Americans, and it is a problem that is associated with increasing the risk of diabetes, hypertension, and many forms of cancer, as well as musculoskeletal disease. If [I] had to select one health problem to focus on, it would probably be [being] overweight and obesity.

What is the most important public health issue that government can help solve today, and what one step is most

important to solving that problem?

This is not an easy question, but let me respond by saying government is in a position to assure that everyone has access to quality health care, and that is one of the major thrusts of the Affordable Care Act. In addition, of course, we look to government to make sure that there are safe environments for us to live, work, play, and be physically active in on a regular basis. Even access to fresh fruits and vegetables, which is critical for good health, is sometimes dependent upon zoning laws controlled by the government. So the government has a role to play in access to care, safe environments, and in providing opportunities and even motivation for a healthy lifestyle, including regular physical activity.