The Surgeon General: David Satcher, MD, PhD

For the first time in 3 years, the United States has a national physician: David Satcher, MD, PhD, who has already made his commitment to the prevention of disease clear in the 4 years he headed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

One of 10 children born to parents who did not finish their schooling, Dr Satcher nearly died of whooping cough. He learned that early lesson well and is credited with spearheading the recent increases in immunization rates among US infants and toddlers.

In contrast to previous nominees to the post of US Surgeon General in the Clinton Administration, Dr Satcher received wide bipartisan support, avoiding the stumbling block of the abortion litmus test that had kept the office vacant for so long. President Clinton’s first surgeon general, Joycelyn Elders, MD, resigned under pressure after making a comment about teenage masturbation as preferable to teenage sex. Her views on other issues such as abortion, teen sexuality, and condoms made her a lightning rod in the administration. The President’s next nominee, Henry Foster, Jr, MD, stumbled over the abortion issue. As an obstetrician-gynecologist, he had performed abortions, a fact that angered the Republican right. Dr Satcher, in comparison, encountered little opposition.

When he was sworn in, Dr Satcher made clear his commitment to the tasks of prevention and his hope of making the office he is assuming the “bully pulpit” that marked the tenure of C. Everett Koop, MD.

"As surgeon general, as Robert Frost said, I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.

"The promise that every child will have a better chance for a healthy start.

"The promise that teenagers will be challenged to treat their minds and bodies and spirits with the respect and responsibility they deserve.

"The promise to bring clarity to a changing healthcare system and to help ensure that it serves well and that it serves all the American people.

"The promise to help harness science and technology and to advance health and healing.

"The promise to work to ensure that every American will have an equal chance for a healthy life.

"The promise that all Americans will understand what they can do to have a healthy life, which includes physical activity, good nutrition, avoiding drugs, and avoiding tobacco, our leading killer.”

At the November Scientific Sessions in Orlando, Fla, Dr Satcher pledged his support to the American Heart Association’s prevention programs, calling for a government partnership with the voluntary health organizations as one of the best ways to improve the health of the public overall.

In particular, Dr Satcher, a family physician and an expert in genetics, will target teenage smoking, a problem that he spotlighted in his speech at the Orlando meeting. How outspoken he will be remains to be seen. He has walked a fine political line in the highly visible post at the CDC.

Dr Satcher, 56, received his undergraduate degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta and was the first black person to graduate from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland with both an MD and a PhD. He was president of Meharry Medical College from 1982 until he was named director of the CDC. Before joining Meharry, he served as professor and chairman of the department of community medicine and family practice at the Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta. He was once on the faculty of the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine and the King/Drew Medical Center in Los Angeles, where he founded and chaired the first department of family medicine. From 1977 to 1979, he served as interim dean of the Charles R. Drew Postgraduate Medical School. He is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences and has received a host of awards honoring his medical and public service. He and his wife, Nola, have four children and currently live in Atlanta.

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