Prevention and Preparedness: Working Together to Improve Public Health

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During my tenure as Surgeon General and my career in the public health service, I have had the privilege of working closely with veterinarians. Veterinarians make up a very important part of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, helping shape public health policy. For example, they serve across the federal government as scientists, epidemiologists, food safety inspectors, and infectious disease specialists.

The reality is that veterinary medicine is changing, and public health is changing. Our ability to surpass the health challenges that we face today will require a collaborative effort. The partnerships that veterinarians and public health practitioners form today will help inspire that collaboration and improve the future health of America and the world.

Many of the issues addressed at this symposium directly intercept with the priorities of the office of the Surgeon General. Take prevention, for example. Prevention is the cornerstone of everything that we're doing at the Department of Health and Human Services. It is a priority for us because each year, millions of Americans die from preventable causes. These deaths, as well as the health-care costs associated with their treatment, are causing tremendous strains on our public health infrastructure.

Our veterinary commissioned officers represent an important part of our prevention efforts. They also contribute to another one of the office of the Surgeon General's top priorities: all-hazards emergency preparedness. Over the past six years, we've all witnessed some defining moments in our nation's history. The terrorist events of 9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the new threats of pandemic flu have firmly planted emergency preparedness on our nation's health agenda. The devastation caused by the hurricanes has required an unprecedented response by federal, state, and local governments as well as the private sector. The increased need for emergency preparedness has sharpened our nation's focus on issues related to public health, and to veterinary medicine as well. We're deeply committed to preparing the nation before disasters strike, and having the right systems in place when emergencies arise.

Prevention and preparedness are inherently important to both public health and veterinary medicine. They represent a shared federal, state, and local responsibility. We need to come together to create a seamless preparedness network, where we are all working together to improve our nation's health.

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