

## Health Policy Forum

### Public Policy and Cardiovascular Disease: Making the Connection

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Cardiovascular disease is the major cause of death, for both men and women, in the United States. The societal impact and burden of this disease is a major concern to clinicians, advocates, and policy experts. Timothy Gardner, President of the American Heart Association (AHA), provided an excellent overview of this issue at a recent Health Policy Forum.

Dr. Gardner first described the role and history of the American Heart Association. From the grass roots level to the federal level, AHA is primarily an advocacy organization. Its mission is focused on building healthier lives, free of cardiovascular disease and stroke. More specifically, AHA's impact goal is to reduce coronary heart disease, stroke, and risk by 25% by 2010. Its primary activities include support for research, public education, advocacy, and professional services.

The American Heart Association conducts multiple programs and campaigns which often focus on

increasing public awareness and encouraging behavior change. For example, *Go Red for Women* is a campaign aimed at supporting AHA's goals by educating the public regarding the misperceptions of coronary disease while raising money for research. *The Heart of Diabetes* is a program that assists and supports those affected by Type II Diabetes in making healthy lifestyle behavior changes. The American Stroke Association (a division of AHA) uses another educational campaign, *The Power to End Stroke*, to provide outreach and education to African Americans on ways to reduce their risk of stroke.

Dr. Gardner discussed the national crisis of childhood obesity and its implications on their risk for future cardiovascular disease and Type II Diabetes. The societal response to this crisis is critical in order to improve the overall health of the population. Dr. Gardner refers to this as "primordial" prevention, or keeping those who

are healthiest and not yet at risk from acquiring those risk factors that can make them vulnerable to disease.

Policies at the governmental level can play a particularly important role in prevention. For example, it was Surgeon General Koop, a champion of anti-smoking campaigns, who laid the foundation for influencing awareness and behavior change nationally. This, in turn, had an effect on decreasing the rate of cardiovascular disease in the US. The AHA has an Office of Federal Advocacy and it continues to work closely with the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. ■

For more information on the American Heart Association, visit its Web site at: [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org).