

## Health Policy Forums

### Philadelphia's Public Health Priorities and Initiatives: Implications for Improving the Health of Vulnerable Populations

**Donald Schwarz, MD, MPH**

*Deputy Mayor for Health and Opportunity  
and Health Commissioner, City of Philadelphia*

*October 14, 2009*

Dr. Schwarz, Deputy Mayor for Health and Opportunity and Health Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia, took time out of his demanding schedule to speak at the Health Policy Forum in October. Throughout his career, Dr. Schwarz has been a strong advocate in the public health arena as a clinician, researcher, administrator, and educator. Prior to his role in government, he was he was Vice Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Deputy Physician-in-Chief and Craig-Dalsimer Division Chief for Adolescent Medicine at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and Professor of Pediatrics in the University of Pennsylvania Schools of Medicine and Nursing at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Dr. Schwarz, within his first few sentences, emphasized education as the key to health of Philadelphians and the overall success of the city. Throughout his presentation he revealed the striking disparities in our city and the interplay between health and economics. He described the deeply profound educational deficits that exist, placing children and youth at risk for myriad economic and health consequences. He stated, "Education is central to the mission of public health."

Using census data, Dr. Schwarz offered a historical overview of how Philadelphia and its neighborhoods have transformed by examining many factors such as: workforce/loss of manufacturing jobs; poverty rates; shifts in populations; immigration; mortality; infant mortality and low birth weight; educational attainment and reading proficiency. He compared some of these issues to other larger cities and to national averages. Of particular concern are the following indicators:

- 35% of children in Philadelphia live in poverty
- 30% of children in Philadelphia are functionally illiterate in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – a serious predictor of future health
- A decline in the number of health care-related social assistance jobs. Health care has preserved core medical functions, but not support positions.
- Of the top 10 cities with the highest poverty rates, Philadelphia is substantially poorer
- 30% of adults in Philadelphia are obese
- HIV/AIDS rates in Philadelphia continue to remain higher than the national average, particularly among African Americans. Late identification and treatment among African American men is an enormous problem with devastating consequences.

Though these issues may sound bleak, Dr. Schwarz explains that many highly successful programs exist in Philadelphia including: early childhood immunization; lead poisoning prevention; and Chlamydia screening and treatment programs.

The focus of the future in Philadelphia, as explained by Dr. Schwarz, is in a few key areas such as expanding employment opportunities; investing in children and families; and shifting to population-based preventive primary care services. Dr. Schwarz challenged the audience to think of public health in the broadest terms, and to partner with other universities and organizations to write proposals and work along side the health department to create programs that emphasize cost-effective best practices.

---

For more information on Philadelphia Department of Public Health programs and services visit:  
<http://www.phila.gov/health/index.html>. ■