

**Weight of the Nation:
CDC's Inaugural Conference on Obesity Prevention and Control
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Opening Remarks

**Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

SECRETARY SEBELIUS:

So, yesterday, you got to focus on some bad news and some good news. The bad news is what's really happening to our country and the weight of our country, that two-thirds of American adults and one out of every five of our children are obese or overweight. We know the kinds of health impacts that weight carries with it: Risk of heart disease, cancer, and stroke. And obesity is clearly the biggest predictor of diabetes. There is a cost issue beyond just the human life issue where we're spending about just under a \$150 billion dollars a year on health conditions related to obesity, a number that's almost twice what it was when CDC first looked at these statistics in 1998. So, just in a little over 11 years, that cost has doubled.

And the American Cancer Society currently estimates that all the cancers combined costs the health system about \$93 billion dollars a year. So, we have a situation where the health conditions related to obesity really have twice the cost impact on the health system as do all the cancers combined in this country. And that's a huge impact, and that clearly doesn't take into account the quality of life and the lives lost. So, that's really the bad news. That's the platform where we find ourselves here in 2009.

But the good news is that CDC also released a second report yesterday, and it looked at what we can do about the growing cost of obesity. And the heartening facts are that there is a lot we can do. And individuals are taking steps into their own hands. As I say, there's a lot of work being done in states across the country. There's a lot of work being done in school districts across the country. And part of our goal is to have an umbrella program where we begin to drive this message nationally, and we engage partners in all sectors of society.

We've got school districts right now, like one in southern California, where they have now about half their children eating at the salad bar instead of some of the other cafeteria items because they started serving fresh greens and local produce instead of vegetables that look like they had been saved for a month or so before they were served to the children. It's amazing, but children really do respond to things that look fresh and healthy. In Northern California, an entire city took on a project that involved getting young girls to go to dancing class. And they found out that it was a lot easier to do if they help provide transportation. So,

they very quickly doubled the number by running some buses around and providing an opportunity for kids to get on the bus and go engage in a physical activity.

Now, the steps aren't necessarily easy, but the CDC report develops a national blueprint for how to get Americans to slim down while trimming a significant amount from our health care costs at the same time. I'm sure you all have heard about the infamous Congressional Budget Office, the famed CBO, which scores various things. And that's Washington speak for they decide how much money you will save from doing certain activities. And they're pretty skeptical right now about prevention and wellness because I think they have not seen any real demonstrated effort that has paid off long term. So, they don't give a lot of credit to anyone who says in health reform or any new bills we're going to focus on prevention and wellness. I happen to believe they're wrong and, in this case, dead wrong, because I am a believer that Americans are beginning to recognize that we're literally killing ourselves, and more importantly, we're killing our children. And there is a growing sentiment that we need to change activities and change what we are doing in order to have a, not only lower health costs, but really raise health outcomes.

So, the administration has a lot of exciting plans in place. But I want to talk for just a few minutes about childhood obesity. I don't think there's anybody in this room who would answer the question who should be focus our attention on that wouldn't start with our children; not only because we all love our children, but it's really the next generation. And it's about the health and prosperity of Americans. And we know they're going to be around a lot longer. So, getting kids in healthy shape just makes good sense.

We know that if kids have a good education, they'll be productive workers and taxpayers. And that's good for this country, and it's good for themselves and their families. We have to have an equally strong focus on having those children healthy and teaching them healthy habits when they're young so they can benefit from those habits just the way they benefit from education for the rest of their lives.

And right now what we know is they're learning the wrong habits. The number of children overweight has quadrupled over the last four decades. Type-two diabetes used to be called adult onset diabetes. Health care providers have stopped using that terminology because there are way too many children presenting with diabetes. We know that overweight adolescents have a 70 percent chance of becoming overweight adults and obese adults. And the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation said that child weight problems can lead to complications such as elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, joint problems, type two diabetes, gallbladder disease, asthma, depression, and anxiety. And they are describing what's happening to America's children right now. That doesn't sound like a very sunny way to grow up.

No wonder that American scientists -- and to me, this is one of the most frightening data points of all. But we have scientists who say that we're on the road to having the current generation of children being the first generation in this country in 200 years to have a shorter life span than their parents. That's a pretty frightening place to be.

So, if there was an epidemic right now in this country of children getting cancer at the rate that children are presenting with diabetes, I think we would find people crying out for some national solution. But unfortunately, the weight problems and obesity problems are still a bit off the radar screen. And because they don't present themselves as dramatic problems until later in life, we've been pretty slow to act. But I think that it's overdue to have a focus like this, a national focus on what's happening, and to recognize that we cannot simply ignore this problem any longer.

I think a number of you have been working on this issue for years and probably are a little skeptical about gathering together for a couple of days, and figure, well, what's going to change. We've known about this. We've known this is growing at an alarming rate. And why would we do anything differently? I think that there is some evidence that people, again, are beginning to wake up a little bit. A recent Time Magazine poll showed six in ten Americans want to lose weight. They recognize that they could be healthier and could be in better shape. But there's a little problem. Six in ten want to lose weight; only three in ten are doing anything about losing weight.

So, we have a problem with a little connector here already that, while there are folks who admit that they may need to do something healthier, they're not really taking any activity. And it's where we are, I think, as a country. We know we need to slim down, we know it's important, we know it affects our health, but we don't have a plan. And I think that's what's so important about the activity you're engaged in today.

The CDC report begins to lay out a plan. And we'll have a much better idea about what strategies work and how to implement them. Not just good ideas but tested programs that we know have proven success, and we can measure what's working and what's not working. And the first thing that the government thinks is really important and that health providers think is important is start eating healthy foods. Sounds pretty simple, but it isn't. And it has to include healthy foods in public schools, in childcare centers, in recreation centers, in senior centers, in cafeterias. And I think it starts with what we're serving day in and day out and particularly what we're serving to our children.

We need to serve healthy foods at prices people can afford. Some say that, you know, kids won't eat healthy foods. I don't think that's the case. I think that the serving of fresh fruits and vegetables, encouraging a broad array of diet, getting pops and sodas out of school cafeteria, cutting the prices of healthy foods. You know, one of the things Google did years ago in their cafeteria, they decided not to try and micro manage what their employees ate. But they introduced some price sensitivity. So, you could get a salad for \$1.50, and you paid \$6.00 for a hamburger. You could buy cookies for twice the price as you paid for fresh fruits and vegetables. They just decided it was a way to kind of wake people up. And if you wanted to spend a little more money as an adult in the cafeteria, you could do that. But you were reminded each and every day that it was not only good for you but good for your pocket book to eat in a healthier fashion.

We need to do that same food and price sensitivity when we can introduce it to our children. We need more healthy options in neighborhoods. Again, I know the Department of Agriculture is working on the so-called food deserts. There are places in rural and urban America where it is impossible to buy fresh produce right now. Grocery stores don't carry it. There isn't a grocery store nearby. But in identifying and mapping where those food deserts are and trying to link local producers and local green grocers with those neighborhoods, we can really have a much wider array of fruits and vegetables available. It's hard to eat healthy if you can't buy it and if you can't have access to the food. So, that's part of what we can tackle with our joint projects. People want to eat healthy diets, but they tend to eat what's available, convenient and affordable. So, if we can, to really get serious about reducing obesity, we need to make healthier foods available and affordable to all Americans.

Clearly we have a challenge working with schools. Way too many schools with the advent of all the testing regime have not only gotten rid of physical education classes, but an alarmingly high number of schools don't even have recess anymore where kids just go out and run around. It's bad not only for our children's health, but it's bad for their minds. Over and over again, studies show that kids actually are able to concentrate at a higher level, are better learners, are better readers, are more focused on school activities if they have some physical activity to go along with it.

So, we've really not only been fattening our children, but we've been dumbing them down by not having a physical regime to go along with their education curriculum. And that's a real challenge, I think, that, again, Secretary of Education, Arnie Dunkin, recognizes and wants to work with us to make sure that we are good partners, that he helps to drive a new, not only physical fitness regime, but exercise regime throughout schools.

We need to help cities and states even in these bad budget times make investments in neighborhoods and city parks, walking trails, rails to trails. There are lots of ways, again, that you can make exercise more available and more accessible. It's difficult to tell people to go take a walk if there's no place safe in their neighborhood to do that, if they can't let their kids go outside without a fear of harm if there isn't access to some place to really take that walk. So, again, that's a challenge that we need to work with our partners in not only the Transportation Department but the HUD folks for urban development have a lot of interest and activity. And, again, this is a very shared responsibility.

So, I think there is exciting opportunities on the horizon and exciting work on the horizon. And I have to tell you how dedicated the First Family is to this initiative. Michelle Obama has decided that this will be one of her major focus areas to work on nutrition and health and children. Planting the garden was a first start, and now eating the fruits and vegetables that are coming out of that garden. But I think she has an enormously powerful bully pulpit and fully intends to use it to help amplify the science and the measurable projects that you all know so well.

Tying into this overall effort for prevention and wellness is clearly the work underway right now with Congress to deal with a comprehensive health reform strategy. We do have some of the best sickness care in the world in this country. But we don't have very good health care for most Americans. About eight cents of every health dollar is spent on any kind of prevention and wellness strategy. Most of the dollars, about 75 percent, are spent on dealing with chronic disease conditions.

So, if we invest a little more, work a little more on measurable results, we can begin to shift to a much healthier nation. We know that keeping people healthy and reducing chronic disease will dramatically lower our costs. And we know that right now, chronic diseases are not only responsible, as I said, for 75 percent of the costs but about 70 percent of the deaths. So, we're really looking at transforming America. I think it's why Congress understood that the billion-dollar investment that they made in wellness and prevention should be part of the recovery act. It was part of reinvesting in America and getting America back on track.

So, whether or not or when a health reform bill passes, this initiative is already started and underway. It's going to focus on three specific areas: On raising our immunization levels, which is critical for the youngest children; on working on hospital related infections, which are on the rise in America and responsible for high health care costs and deaths. But the bulk of those resources are going to focus on a national prevention and wellness strategy. Under the leadership of experts gathered by the CDC, a robust discussion has been underway about the best possible use of those resources. And we will be launching the program in the next couple of months. But it's going to focus primarily on helping states and local communities attack obesity and come up with comprehensive health strategies. Again, we want to drive these initiatives, not from inside the beltway in Washington, but really from local communities across this country and have some real measurable results. We are partnering with the Department of Education and Agriculture and Transportation to help folks lead healthier lives.

So, Americans are focused on health care discussions these days. Some of it is on the activity going on in the Hill, which, hopefully, can give all our citizens available, affordable health care, but also begin to raise on the radar screen the situation that we're in where some additional, personal responsibility and steps that individuals can take have to be introduced into this conversation. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. We have stars aligned and leaders aligned, and we know a lot about the signs of what works and what doesn't work.

So, I just want to thank you all for not only being here today but the work that you're doing in communities across this country. We have an opportunity to look back on this moment in 2009 when the platform of our health data and our children's health data is pretty grim and to recognize that we made a turn in the right direction - That we committed ourselves to a healthier, more prosperous nation. We committed ourselves to extending the lives of our children far into the future, and that they will live as healthier adults if we can change health habits at an early age, if we can make a dent in what's happening

right now with increased statistics in childhood weight and obesity, if we can use our assets and resources, our knowledge of the science and health communities to actually begin to produce a healthier nation.

I look forward to working with you. I think that the Department of Health and Human Services, once again, believes in health and human services. We are back. We believe that the science should be the guide. And I just want to assure you we're not alone. We have a president and an administration full of leaders who are eager to help partner to tackle this challenge. So, thank you for what you're doing.