

# Sick of U.S. health status



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With his cajun drawl and no-nonsense style, retired Lt. Gen. Russel Honore chewed out Americans Thursday for fouling up health care.

Minus his green beret cocked to one side and the cigar hanging out of his mouth, Honore barked out orders similar to when he took over stalled emergency efforts in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit.

According to the "ragin' cajun," for every \$4 collected by the federal government, \$1 goes toward health care. The same

amount goes to the nation's military.

"I can tell you unequivocally you've got the best military in the world," he said, noting the Air Force could target the table in the Bowling Green State University room where he was speaking, and leave the rest of the room relatively unscathed.

The same precision can not be attributed to the nation's health system, he said.

"This is a great place to get sick," Honore said. "We will spend all the money to keep you alive."

But little is spent to prevent people from getting sick in the first place.

Honore was part of a panel of speakers at the 10th annual Ned E. Baker Lecture in Public Health, focusing on "Building a Healthier America." He was joined by Dr. J. Nick Baird, of the Alliance to Make US Healthiest, and Dr. Stephanie Bailey, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

All three speakers said the U.S. should be putting more effort into prevention, with every \$1 in prevention saving \$9 in response, Honore said.

The U.S. currently spends \$2.3 trillion a year on health care, yet it is ranked 37th among nations in world health.

"Somehow we're not really getting value for our health dollar," Baird said.

An estimated 70 percent of American deaths are preventable, yet little is spent to prevent them, Baird added.

America needs to shift from a "sick care system" to a health system, Bailey suggested.

But the tricky part is that the solution won't come from Washington, D.C. It's got to come from the community level, the three said. The "fast talking, prompt reading" leaders in the nation's capital aren't going to save the day, Honore said. The shift will take place at the grassroots, where schools will insist on physical education and restaurants will list calorie counts.

"You've got to change it starting in preschool lunchrooms," he said, adding that carrying a backpack to school should not be a child's only exercise each day. "The question is, are we willing to do that?"

The change will occur when women put as much effort into scheduling a mammogram as they do setting up a hair appointment, Bailey said.

And the change will occur when Americans ignore the commercials trying to convince them to clean their colons and solve their sexual dysfunctions - and instead focus on diabetes and obesity, Honore said.

"You'd think we had the dirtiest colons in the world," he said of the ads scattered across TVs. "You wouldn't know we have a diabetes problem."

The nation needs a cultural shift, Honore said. And that includes our dinner tables.

"We learned to eat from our parents, who worked the fields of this country. We have those same recipes, but guess what - we're not working it off in between meals."

And Americans need to realize that health is linked to individual economics. "Health care is not an issue for rich white people," Honore said. Rather, it's an issue for the one-third of Americans who are among the working poor, unemployed, disabled and elderly - those will have little access to farm-fresh stores, safe walking areas and gym memberships.

The solution will not come from spending more money on health care - but instead just shuffling it to preventative care.

"It's not about more health care, it's about less," Honore said. "Just spending more money won't solve this. We need to put health at the same level as we do football."

But sadly, even some lessons of Hurricane Katrina have already been forgotten, he said.

"They spend more time getting ready for football season than hurricane season," he said of the Gulf Coast areas.

Honore said he was particularly frustrated when trying to evacuate the ill and elderly from New Orleans. The hospitals would not let the patient records go with the patients. So when the patients got to other hospitals outside the hurricane zone, many had no idea what medications they were on, other than "that little red pill." That same inefficiency was repeated three years later when Hurricane Ike hit.

But grassroots efforts can make a difference, according to the three panelists. Just like the smoking ban in Bowling Green and the trans-fat ban in New York City - national efforts can start at the local level.

However, Honore cautioned that such groundswells can't be quiet and polite.

"Getting angry and sending an e-mail is not going to solve it," he said, pounding his fist on the table.

Legislators must be told by citizens that voting party lines will not be tolerated - they should do what is right for their constituents.

"We need to be courageous," Bailey said.

"Our vision is simply to make the U.S. the healthiest nation in a healthier world," Baird said.

