

The 1st South Asian American Health Conference
General Session

Moderator:

Chandak Ghosh, MD, MPH, Medical Consultant for USDHHS/HRSA;
Founding Board Member for the South Asian Health Project.

Speakers:

Upendra J. Chivukula, New Jersey State Assembly, Represents the 17 District.
Linda J. Holmes, MPA, Executive Director, NJ Office of Minority and Multicultural Health.
Gen Daus, MA, Policy Director, Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum

This session began with Moderator Chandak Ghosh commenting that nowadays medicine and politics are intertwined, and, to overcome the medical obstacles that face South Asian Americans, the community must learn how to affect health policy.

Assemblyman Upendra J. Chivukula lamented that although there are many South Asian healthcare providers, very few participate in the political process by contacting their representatives at both the state and federal levels. One of his main concerns was evidence of healthcare disparities among the South Asian population compared to the white population. He felt that mixing data related to South Asian health with that describing all Asian health would not help South Asians learn about the issues specific to their genetics and culture. He supports legislation that will look closer at South Asian health disparities specifically. He also felt that the lack of cultural competence training by healthcare professionals not only interfered with the relationship with South Asian patients but also made these providers assume that parameters for good health were the same in all populations.

Linda Holmes reminded everyone of the federal government's study in the 1980's entitled "Closing the Gap." This was among the first documents to note the existence of health disparities between whites and blacks. The NJ Office of Minority and Multicultural Health (OMMH) recently sponsored a series of summits that focused on African American, Latino, and Asian American health. From these summits, a number of issues affecting all ethnic minorities groups arose. Foremost is the lack of data for all groups with regards to health. Other issues included the need for cultural competency education for medical students and ways to find insurance for new immigrants. There remains a major need for more minorities to become healthcare professionals. OMMH has developed a fact sheet about Asian Americans, but it is limited by the data that the NJ Department of Health and Senior Services has on Asian populations. She asked that anyone interested in grant programs to do work involving ethnic minorities should contact her office.

Gem Daus gave an overview of federal politics and upcoming legislation that will affect Asian Americans. Medicaid is slated to be cut by 10 billion dollars over the next ten years. A Comprehensive Health Disparity Bill has been introduced to pay for studies that will gain minority groups more data with regards to their health status. NIH's National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparity advocates for community-based participatory research. Last year the Undocumented Alien Emergency Medical Assistance Amendment failed although the final vote was close. It wanted emergency rooms to ask if each patient was a citizen or immigrant. That data would have been sent to the Department of Homeland Security. This would have scared off minority patients from seeking care. Daus asked everyone to learn the value of lobbying their politicians for their needs. Daus is amazed how often he has to explain to Congress what exactly Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are.