

THE ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE PROFESSIONALS IN NURTURING HEALTHY FAMILIES AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

When Regina Benjamin was featured nationwide as ABC World News Tonight's "Person of the Week," she was described as a "country doctor" who "wants to help people more than she wants to make a bunch of money." In an area of the nation where there is a serious shortage of primary care, and people often are too poor to pay for medical services, Dr. Benjamin makes house calls.

This graduate of Morehouse School of Medicine and the University of Alabama at Birmingham is a model of how to nurture healthy families and healthy communities. "I just want to make a difference in people's lives and stop the hurt," she told Peter Jennings.

Bayou Le Batre is a small shrimp-harvesting village along the Gulf Coast where Dr. Benjamin was sent to fulfill her National Health Service Corps obligation after completing medical school. "I liked the people, I liked the community, and I wanted to practice medicine there," she said. She entered solo practice and spent several years moonlighting in emergency rooms and nursing homes to keep her practice open. After receiving an MBA degree from Tulane University, she converted her office to a rural health clinic.

Dr. Benjamin is also associate dean for rural health at the University of South Alabama's College of Medicine in Mobile. In 1998 she was the United States' recipient of the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights. Her most recent honor is an award from the National Center for Primary Care at Morehouse School of Medicine.

"I have learned that one person *can* make a difference, whether it's in medical policy or in medical practice," Dr. Benjamin said.

POLICY ARENA

She has had a tremendous impact in the policy area. She serves on a number of state boards, where she lobbies for better rural health care. She is president of the Medical Association of Alabama. In 1995 she was elected to the American Medical Association's board of trustees—the first physician under age 40 and the first African-American woman to be chosen.

Her leadership in the policy arena began while she was a young resident at the Medical Center of Central Georgia in Macon, Georgia. The Medical Association of Georgia (MAG) was meeting there, and one of the top issues for debate was whether sexually transmitted diseases should be taught in medical school. Regina Benjamin stood up and told the group of physicians from all over the state, "I have never seen syphilis or gonorrhea except in textbooks. I believe medical students need to learn more about this type of disease."

The MAG passed a resolution and sent Dr. Benjamin to speak on its behalf at a meeting of the American Medical Association. The AMA liked the idea, and within 6 months every medical school in the nation was encouraged to include sexually transmitted diseases as part of the core curriculum.

VICTORIES IN THE CLINIC

Other victories have come at home in the clinic, where Dr. Benjamin says she has learned that "there are some things my prescription pad simply cannot cure."

One example is a young woman named Donna whose seizures were being controlled by medication and then suddenly

"We were attracted to this person because she so clearly represents the notion that for some people, serving one's fellow citizens is such a gratifying calling that neither fame nor wealth is a satisfactory substitute."—Peter Jennings, ABC World News Tonight

Dreaming a bigger dream

When an 8-year-old African-American girl visited the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), she stood in awe of the buildings on campus. “Do you think they will let me clean those buildings when I grow up?” she asked.

“We have to be the people who tell children like this little girl that they can do more in those buildings than clean them,” Dr. Regina Benjamin told the audience of health providers at the Primary Care Conference. “We have to tell children that there are chairs waiting for them in classrooms at UAB and other universities across the nation,” said the community-oriented physician, who blends policy making with patient healing in a clinic in rural Alabama.

went haywire. Donna could not read, but she could draw pictures of pills—solid ones and striped ones in different colors. The medicine had changed, and she didn’t know which pill to take.

A patient named Willie was hospitalized with an injured hand. Before he was released, the social worker asked what she could do for him after he returned home. “Can you teach me to read?” he asked.

Dr. Benjamin found community programs in Mobile that would help both Donna and Willie learn to read.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

“A healthy community is just as important as a blood pressure, a good blood sugar, keeping the air clean, or having a safe place to live,” Dr. Benjamin told the audience at the Primary Care Conference. “Good mental health is just as important as monitoring HbA_{1c}.”

People often talk about money in discussing many of the major health problems, Dr. Benjamin said. “I like the old saying, ‘We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.’ Don’t let money or the lack of it stop you from making a difference in your community and in your day-to-day lives. There are some things that are simply more impor-

tant—that hug, that smile, that look on that mother’s face when you tell her that her baby is going to be okay, whether that baby is 3 years old or 33 years old.”

All of these things take leadership. Dr. Benjamin’s favorite style is to “lead from behind.” She likes to encourage others to succeed, while backing them up and being there to keep them from falling. “The person who stands behind can be a stronger leader than the person out front,” she said.

Reminding the audience that they have the “time and opportunity to support people” and a responsibility to do so, she urged them to remember that their actions can affect people that they don’t even know. For example, after Dr. Benjamin was interviewed for a newspaper article, she received a manila envelope filled with letters from school children. “I want to be just like you,” one second-grader wrote. “If just one of these students becomes a doctor, it will be worth it,” Dr. Benjamin said.

“You never know who’s watching what you do,” she continued. “Your actions can affect people you don’t even know.” While attending an AMA meeting as the only African-American member of the AMA board, Dr. Benjamin was approached by an elderly Black man who was a hotel employee. “He said he wanted me to know that everyone who worked there was watching me and that they were very proud of me.”