

Policy Advisory Toward Health (PATH) *for women*: Oregon Health & Science University Center for Women's Health

The OHSU Center for Women's Health (CWH) has established Policy Advisory Toward Health (PATH) for women in response to the critical need for current, evidence-based information concerning women's health to assist in developing health policy affecting women's health. PATH for women is intended to serve policymakers as the premier evidence-based women's health policy group for Oregon and beyond.

The Need for Women's Health Policy Research

Health policy for women has focused on only a few indicators of health, and has not kept pace with emerging evidence that women differ from men in types of presenting symptoms, diagnosis and prognosis of disease, response to treatment and programs to effect behavior change. Michelle Berlin, MD, MPH, Director of PATH *for women*, is co-author of *Making the Grade on Women's Health: A National and State-by-State Report Card*, which clearly documents the continuing and significant need to improve the national status of women's health. The lack of access to appropriate care including prenatal care, or adequate care for chronic diseases such as diabetes, stroke, and high blood pressure adversely impacts the quality of life and ability to work for thousands of women. These are very real issues for our regional and national health services as well as economic viability. Addressing these issues requires an informed and evidence-based approach, including gathering information, analyzing key data, and determining the steps needed to address issues uncovered. These steps include providing and interpreting the results of data analysis to key stakeholders (including legislators) as well as the design and evaluation of model programs to address identified deficiencies.

As highlighted in the 2004 edition of *Making the Grade on Women's Health*, Oregon is falling short in the provision of first trimester prenatal care (ranking 36th among the states), and was among the worst 10 states for deaths from stroke and lung cancer among women. Oregon failed in other key areas including having an excessively high rate of diabetes and low rate of cholesterol screening. The high interest in women's health issues in Oregon makes it an ideal national model to show the benefits of an information partnership with legislators and policymakers having easy access to credible, in-depth information for gender-based issues in health care.

PATH *for women* is a program of the OHSU Center for Women's Health

The mission of the OHSU Center for Women's Health includes fostering interdisciplinary research in public health, public policy analysis, education, and clinical care models for diseases unique to women, more common in women, or with presentations or treatments that differ in women of all ages, stages and walks of life. The Center for Women's Health has more than a 10-year history of community input, a partnership that extends to PATH *for women* and its work. OHSU was designated one of only 21 U.S. Department of Health Services' National Center's of Excellence in Women's Health (CoE) in September 2003, acknowledging its national leadership in efforts in clinical care, professional education, leadership, community outreach and research and providing encouragement to expand and continue our work. The Center's rich mix of research-based and clinical care disciplines, found nowhere else within an academic women's health center, creates the opportunity to address fundamental questions in women's health across all aspects of health care and health care policy.

Our faculty's expertise include clinical research that provides the underpinnings for policy development, development of key data sources for use in public health planning and clinical care, research into health conditions with disparities among differing groups of women, ethical aspects of provision of care to women, experience in the development of pragmatic approaches to provision of care, and recognition of the importance of emphasizing key aspects of women's health in medical undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate training. Our faculty also has demonstrated experience in interpreting the results of their research and the work of others to community members and legislators, ranging from legislative testimony concerning provision of health care to serving as editors/associate editors of nationally recognized medical journals.

Our state has both rural and urban populations tightly linked to OHSU programs, as well as some of the most troubling health disparities between gender and ethnic groups in the country. OHSU has long-standing collaborative relationships with community leaders, state health departments, community hospitals and health systems, regional universities, and other graduate training programs. The CWH has the ability and history of working with state entities, including the Oregon Department of Human Services' Health Services section, to propose and evaluate efforts in governmental as well as private settings. These characteristics are critical to the success of PATH *for women*: models developed in Oregon's health and research environment can serve as templates for other areas of the country.

PATH *for women* will ensure that an evidence-based health information resource is available to state and national representatives, health professionals, health policy advocates engaged in health care policy and the community at large.

PATH for women is undertaking the following initiatives and products:

- 1) **Identification of key areas in women's health with policy impact, and development of materials for use by policymakers:** These areas constitute current, pertinent issues on women's health within clinical care, screening and prevention or behavioral health with immediate interest to policymakers and the public. Our first project concerns the current insurance mandates for breast and cervical cancer screening in Oregon: these mandates are due to expire (due to sunset provisions) during the 2005 legislative session — we have prepared information concerning the importance of breast and cervical cancer screening services, and of having these mandates be permanent.
- 2) **How to interpret the results of health studies, for policymakers, the media and the general public:** Understanding the results of studies is a stumbling block for many. While study results can be complex, some defined rules can make that process more accessible. These rules, derived from accepted techniques and criteria from evidence-based medicine, can be understood by a wide variety of audiences. A key aspect of Dr. Berlin's work concerns translating the results of clinical research to colleagues in medicine and public health, as well as those involved in developing and reporting about public policy. As part of this effort, materials will be developed for both the Website and in print about how to better understand medical literature.
- 3) **Exploration of existing evidence-based materials for the public and policymakers:** While much medical news and analyses are available, it is not clear how much is based upon evidence or upon opinion. As we find them, we will highlight Websites and related materials that provide accessible and reliable information about women's health care that are important to the development of health policy. Updating and expanding the list of materials will remain an ongoing effort.
- 4) **Design and launch of Website:** Our chief goal is to provide accurate, evidence-based information that is accessible and the dissemination of that information is key to our success. We will develop a Website that is easy to navigate, with information that is reliable and up-to-date.

PATH for women will define a common ground for setting the local and national agenda for research focused on women's health. The answers obtained will clearly benefit the citizens of the state of Oregon and the nation as a whole.

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