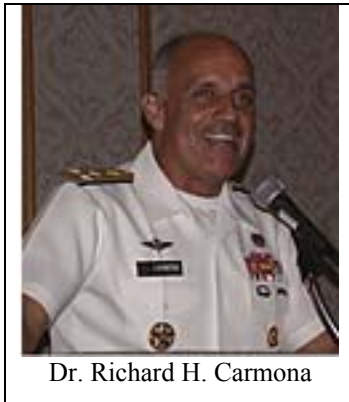


# A Brief Interview with Vice Admiral Richard H. Carmona, MD, MPH, FACS Surgeon General of the United States

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Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona grew up in the streets of New York. He credited a stint in the army with leading to a career that included acquiring a GED, being a policeman, a nurse, a physician's assistant, a medical

school graduate, and ultimately, the top health officer of the United States. Vice Admiral Carmona exemplifies the heights that can be achieved with solid determination and hard work. He is no ordinary man. Those who had the opportunity to hear his address at the Florida Public Health Association's annual meeting in 2003 were fortunate in gaining insight into this impressive leader of our nation's public health efforts. Surgeon General Carmona gave a message of optimism for a revitalized public health system. Afterwards, I engaged him in a brief series of questions and answers.

**MJY:** *What are the critical public health issues facing the nation?*

**RHC:** Prevention must form the base of our health care system. We as a nation must embrace prevention. We can reduce the economic burden of health care by focusing on prevention. For example, the costs related to problems of obesity are enormous, yet obesity is preventable. Prevention first! In addition, the President and key officials fully support and understand the need to address health disparities and the need for access to health care by the uninsured. Public health understands preparedness. What is preparedness but prevention? Bioterrorism and the addressing of weapons of mass destruction involve the preventive skills that are the essence of public health practice. Message transformation or the ability to package science and deliver it to the public in a way our citizens can understand is the message that is [the] key to successful intervention. Many of the elderly cannot read their prescription bottles, many in our communities do not understand food labeling, and others have language barriers; after all



we are a nation of diverse populations. The public needs to understand what public health professionals know to get the desired result.

**MJY:** *What is the U.S.'s international commitment to public health?*

**RHC:** [The occurrence of]

SARS and infectious diseases have made addressing international health issues of paramount importance. Existing efforts include, but are not limited to, the Pan American Health Organization, World Health Organization, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There is a raised awareness that public health is a global issue. Although our commitment to international health issues is disproportionately high compared to some other countries, it must be realized that many countries do not have the resources or infrastructure to deal with their health issues. Pathogens have no passports; it is imperative to respond to disease wherever it is found. Also, the international commitment to public health is improving as was recently demonstrated by the successful global response to the SARS outbreak.

**MJY:** *Is U.S. public health in disarray as the Institute of Medicine report indicates?*

**RHC:** There is a need for a basic health infrastructure that is seamless from local health departments, to state, to national programs. There has been an improvement in public health's infrastructure since the initial IOM publication, *The Future of Public Health*. I foresee continued progress. Examples of this progress can be seen in our efforts to combat anthrax, West Nile Virus, and SARS.

**MJY:** *How serious is the liability crisis in Florida and the nation?*

**RHC:** The President is committed to addressing the liability issue. Doctors are drifting to states that are user (liability) friendly. We do have a crisis; Florida is working hard to address its issues. Congress is

seeking solutions. I am optimistic that progress is being made on this issue.

**MJY:** *Any other thoughts?*

**RHC:** We as public health professionals must keep public health in the forefront. Access to care is a problem we must solve and a strong public health infrastructure is imperative. I am appreciative of the leadership that understands our public health issues.

We as professionals must find more effective ways to communicate our prevention message.

**MJY:** Surgeon General Carmona, thank you.

**Marc J. Yacht** is Director of the Pasco County Health Department, New Port Richey, Florida. He was a frequent contributor to the *Florida Journal of Public Health*, and is now a member of the Founding Board of Editors of the *Florida Public Health Review*. He offers occasional commentary on public health issues affecting Floridians. This paper was submitted to the *FPHR* on March 4, 2004, revised, and accepted for publication on March 10, 2004. Copyright ©2004 by the *Florida Public Health Review*.