



Dr. M. Joycelyn Elders, Former U.S. Surgeon General

Lectured at Siena on January 23, 2003

“Unequal Access: Differential Health Care in America”

Former U.S. Surgeon General, and the first African American woman to hold that post, Dr. M. Joycelyn Elders is the eldest of eight children. Now a Distinguished Professor of Public Health at the University of Arkansas, she never saw a physician prior to her first year in college. At the age of fifteen, she received a scholarship from the United Methodist Church to attend Philander-Smith College in Little Rock, AR. Upon graduation at age 18, she entered the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant where she received training as a physical therapist.

Dr. Elders attended the University of Arkansas Medical School (UAMS) on the G.I. Bill. After graduation in 1960, she was an intern at the University of Minnesota Hospital in Minneapolis and did a pediatric residency and an endocrinology fellowship at the University of Arkansas Medical Center in Little Rock. She ascended the academic ladder to full professorship after her fellowship and board certification in 1976. She also holds a master of science degree in biochemistry.

Dr. Elders joined the faculty at UAMS as a professor of pediatrics and received board certification as a pediatric endocrinologist in 1978. Based on her studies of growth in children and the treatment of hormone related illnesses, she has written many articles for medical research publications. She was appointed Director of the Arkansas Department of Health in October, 1987. While serving as director, she was elected president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers.

Nominated as Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service by President Clinton in July of 1993, she was confirmed by the Senate on September 7, and sworn in on September 8. During the Senate hearings on her confirmation, Dr. Elders stated “I want to change the way we think about health by putting prevention first. I want to be the voice and vision of the poor and powerless. I want to change concern about social problems that affect health into commitment. And I would like to make every child born in America a wanted child”.

Dr. Elders has been active in civic affairs as a member of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce, Northside YMCA and Youth Homes. She was listed in “100 Outstanding Women in Arkansas”, “Personalities of the South” and “Distinguished Women in America”. She has won awards such as the Arkansas Democrat’s Woman of the Year, the National Governor’s Association Distinguished Service Award, the American Medical Association’s Dr. Nathan Davis Award, and the National Coalition of 100 Black Women’s Candace Award for Health Science.

Dr. Elders has also received multiple honorary doctorate of sciences degrees and honorary doctorate of letters degrees.