

HELPING STATE GOVERNMENTS ADDRESS CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

in Women

Nearly 60,000 more American women than men die of cardiovascular disease each year, and despite widespread perceptions to the contrary, cardiovascular disease — not cancer — is the number one killer of women in this country.

The Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation has sought to open up additional avenues of awareness. Last year, it tried something new, and in March 2005, it repeated the effort.

For the first time, legislators representing 11 states and the administrators of 14 state offices of women's health convened for a National Summit on Cardiovascular Disease in Women. This program was supported by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation in partnership with Women In Government, a nonprofit organization that educates state-level policy makers.

"Our organization is unique," says Susan Crosby, executive director of Women In Government and a former Indiana state legislator. "We put a face on cutting-edge policy issues. Among other things, Women In Government has championed the creation of dedicated state offices of women's health. There are only 14 formalized offices today. With this summit we brought together existing offices of women's health and their legislative champions to share model programs and exchange best practices. Many people still do not realize cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of women. In many states, interactions between executive and legislative branches are prohibited. This was an excellent opportunity to initiate a dialogue around a serious issue."

Crosby adds, "Initially, we also wanted to see how we could strengthen these offices of women's health. We talked to the Foundation and decided we could do that by helping them come together and share information around specific issues. The second summit was designed to continue this conversation and create momentum within the states."

Barbara Levy Tobey, director of Indiana's State Office of Women's Health, attended both summits and recognizes a real need to do more for women. She says, "Women make about 75 percent of the health care decisions in their families and for others, but very often they forget about their own health. They may outlive men, but often in not very good physical condition. Our office is focusing on the importance of taking women's health seriously."

"The summit reconfirmed to me how important heart disease prevention for women really is and while our other health programs are also important, heart disease should be at the cornerstone of many of our efforts. I'll be looking for better and more creative ways to get the message out about women's heart health."

