

## **Briefing Summary – April 16 “Women’s Health Prevention Priorities”**

On April 16, Women’s Policy, Inc. (WPI), in cooperation with Reps. Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA) and Donna Edwards (D-MD), Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues (the Women’s Caucus), and Reps. Kristi Noem (R-SD) and Doris Matsui (D-CA), Vice-Chairs of the Women’s Caucus, sponsored a briefing on Capitol Hill to discuss women’s health prevention priorities. The briefing was the first in a women’s health series underwritten by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The briefing was intended to give an overview of prevention priorities for reducing morbidity and mortality among women across the lifespan. Approximately 100 guests attended the briefing, including Members of Congress, senior congressional staff, and representatives of federal agencies, health and women’s advocacy organizations, and the media.

Cindy Hall, president of WPI, introduced the briefing speakers: Dr. Ileana Arias, principal deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), and Dr. Paula A. Johnson, executive director of the Connors Center for Women’s Health and Gender Biology, chief of the Division of Women’s Health at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, and associate professor at Harvard Medical School.

### **Members of the Women’s Caucus**

Congresswoman Donna Edwards (D-MD), Co-Chair of the Women’s Caucus, attended the briefing and expressed her support for women’s health prevention. She focused on the need for increased investments in prevention and research to learn more about the biological differences between men and women. She highlighted the need to focus on women’s mental and heart health, and discussed the important role women play as caregivers of their children, families, and communities. She requested a “to-do” list for Congress to better address prevention priorities in order to improve women’s health.

Congresswoman Lois Capps (D-CA), former Caucus co-chair and Women’s Health Task Force co-chair, also attended. She began her remarks by stating that the topic of prevention is critical. She noted that women’s health is inextricably tied to the health of families and communities. Congresswoman Capps explained her belief that the nation is at a tipping point when it comes to the prevention of chronic disease, and that this is an area where women can truly make a difference. She said that while effective interventions are available today, the country must continue to expand on efforts to make such interventions free and accessible to everyone.

### **Dr. Ileana Arias**

Dr. Arias opened with a brief overview of CDC’s efforts to increase prevention within the U.S. and globally. She explained that in order to lower, or at least maintain, health care costs, the country must focus on preventing disease before it occurs. She said that health, like politics, is a local issue, so CDC supports local and state health departments to deploy CDC’s information and research in order to improve the health of their respective populations.

Dr. Arias identified the top three causes of death for women – heart disease, cancer, and stroke – and noted that these three diseases account for over 50 percent of deaths of among women annually. Further, there are strategies to prevent each of these diseases, or prolong life once an individual has been diagnosed. Since heart disease, cancer, and stroke share risk factors, CDC treats them as a “team” of diseases to address simultaneously. CDC is focused on expanding successful interventions for this “team” of diseases and ensuring women have access to all available preventive services. Dr. Arias shared the “ABCS campaign,” part of the HHS Million Hearts Campaign, to increase awareness about the activities that help prevent heart disease and stroke. She highlighted the importance of early detection in preventing and successfully treating cancer, and spoke about the disparities between Caucasian and African-American women diagnosed with breast cancer. She said while there are biological differences between the two groups, the higher rates of death among African-American women diagnosed with breast cancer are partially due to lack of access to early screening, diagnosis, and treatment.

Dr. Arias discussed the preventive services for women made available with no cost-sharing by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), including mammograms, well-woman visits, and tobacco cessation. She demonstrated the importance of insurance coverage by noting that uninsured individuals suffer more health problems due to lack of access to preventive services. To conclude, she shared CDC’s efforts to raise awareness about the new Health Insurance Exchanges under the ACA, the benefits of preventive care, and the availability of preventive service benefits under new ACA qualified health plans.

### **Dr. Paula A. Johnson**

Dr. Johnson began her presentation by highlighting the importance of addressing women’s health issues, stating that “women’s health is a major determinant of the health of communities and future generations.” She used two examples of biological differences between men and women in order to showcase the need for research into the role sex and gender plays in the development of disease.

Dr. Johnson explored prevention priorities throughout a woman’s lifespan, touching on the opportunities for primary and secondary prevention during reproductive years, menopause, and old age. She focused on the importance of preventing heart disease during a woman’s reproductive years and the need to integrate primary and reproductive health care in order to ensure adequate primary prevention during these critical years. She then moved to midlife women’s health, identifying arthritis as the major cause of disability for menopausal and older women. She explained the importance of improving self-management through education, physical activity, and weight management to prevent arthritis and related health problems. Although the major opportunities for primary prevention of chronic disease have already passed once a woman reaches old age, Dr. Johnson noted the importance of secondary prevention and adequate treatment for existing conditions. Dr. Johnson also discussed the impacts of caregiving on women’s health, stating that the risk of death due to cardiovascular disease is almost twice as high for women caring for an ill or disabled spouse. Further, women caring for an ill parent with no support from

siblings are three times more likely to die from cardiovascular disease than women with siblings in the same caregiving circumstances.

Dr. Johnson also highlighted opportunities to improve prevention for women under the ACA. She explained the law's Essential Health Benefits package, which includes maternity and newborn care, mental health and substance use disorder services, and chronic disease management, and gave examples of specific preventive services for women that are covered with no cost-sharing under the ACA. To conclude her presentation, Dr. Johnson made several policy recommendations to improve prevention for women, including:

- Create medical home models that improve health care delivery and reflect the health needs of women;
- Invest in public health infrastructure;
- Develop workforce policies, including through Medicare and Medicaid demonstrations, that support female caregivers and primary care providers;
- Require reporting of data stratified by sex in health insurance exchanges;
- Require reporting of data stratified by sex on access to preventive care and related health outcomes; and
- Invest in research into the mechanisms of disease that differ by gender, gender-specific interventions to reduce chronic disease rates, and the best models of health care delivery that result in desired outcomes.

The event concluded with a question and answer session, allowing audience members to join in the discussion.

Please click on this [link](#) to view the webcast of the briefing and discussion period.