

Rear Admiral Susan Jane Blumenthal:

A crusader for women's health

BY SUSAN WITTMAN



For Dr. Susan Jane Blumenthal, a family tragedy forged an interest in medicine into a personal crusade for women's health. When she was 10, her mother developed thyroid cancer, and, when she was in college, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. After the cancer spread to her spine, she lost control of bodily functions and could no longer walk. But she lived to see her daughter become a doctor.

"I resolved then and there that I didn't want to see another woman suffer the way she did," Blumenthal told CNN recently.

An assistant surgeon general and rear admiral with the U.S. Public Health Service, Blumenthal will be the guest speaker, Oct. 7, at the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of Broward County's inaugural fall event at the Weston Hills Country Club.

The Women's Division will honor Blumenthal with its inaugural "Woman of Valor" award, which recognizes Jewish women who are outstanding role models.

Blumenthal, who is also senior science advisor in the Department of Health and Human Services, is a national expert on women's health and mental illness. She was named among the top 12 female doctors in the country by the New York Times and the Ladies Home Journal, and one of the 20 most influential women in medicine by the Medical Herald. She will address "Public Health Issues Facing Women in the 21st Century."

Blumenthal, 47, who is married to Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), is also a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University's School of Medicine and Tufts University Medical Center. She developed a mental-health specialty after she became aware that diseases such as depression and panic disorder affect twice as many women as men and that eating disorders affect nine times more women than men. Blumenthal was concerned when she learned that only male rats were used in studies of depression.

Women's mental health has been a neglected area of research," she said. "Researchers have discovered

that these conditions are caused by interaction between biological, psychological and environmental factors.

In the past two decades we have learned much about the brain and behavior and this has opened a window of understanding that hopefully one day will shatter the stigma associated with this disabling illness."

Blumenthal began her career at the National Institute of Mental Health as a researcher, grants administrator and project director. In 1983 she joined the NIH, where her research in behavioral medicine focused on eating disorders, women's mental health and teen suicide.

In 1990, a colleague invited her to co-chair the new Society for the Advancement of Women's Health Research, which was formed to focus attention on inequities in medical care for women. That same year, a General Accounting Office study revealed that a tiny percentage of the NIH budget was dedicated to women's health. Women's health advocates were also up in arms over a study that showed aspirin reduced heart attacks in men. Although heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death in American women, no women were used in the study.

Blumenthal rode the wave of reaction to that study and the outcry among women in Congress and other advocates on behalf of women's health issues. Intense lobbying for the creation of a Department of Health and Human Services post that focused on women's health was successful. President Bush created the Office on Women's Health in 1991. In 1994, President Clinton appointed Blumenthal to head it as its second director, with the title of deputy assistant secretary.

Blumenthal worked to redress inequities and coordinate efforts in women's health research, health care and public and professional education, across HHS agencies.

She initiated National Centers for Excellence in Women's Health at academic centers nationwide and she developed the National Women's Health Information Center, placing a vast network of resources at women's fingertips via a toll-free number and a Web site in English and Spanish.

Blumenthal also helped spearhead a unique collaboration between the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration called "From Missiles to Mammograms." The joint venture transferred space-age digital imaging technology used for military and space exploration to improve the early detection of breast cancer and reduce the incidence of

invasive biopsies. The same technology that can ferret out a camouflaged enemy tank or relay detailed images of Mars is able to detect the 15 percent of breast cancers that evade traditional mammography by hiding behind dense breast tissue. The technology is also useful in the research and treatment of osteoporosis, reproductive health and heart disease.

"With the end of the Cold War, our new national enemies are diseases like breast cancer," she said. "Our first priority is disease prevention."

Many diseases are influenced by behavioral and lifestyle factors, she said. "Promoting healthy lifestyles is a key priority we can do something about. In terms of prevention, we need to be savvy health consumers."

Women's health priorities for the next century include health insurance for every woman and healthy aging, she said. "By the year 2030, 25 percent of females will be over 65," she said. "In the 1900s, the life expectancy of women was 46; today it is 79. We need to insure these bonus years are truly better years."

Blumenthal wants to see the promotion of more women leaders in academia. "In our nation's medical schools, only four women are deans," she said. "Less than 6 percent are chairs of department and less than 9 percent are tenured professors. Forty-five percent of entering medical students are women, but it's a long way to the top. And it's at the top where priorities are shaped."

Another reason that women's medical issues have lagged behind men's is that men — and male rats — have long been used as models for research, she said.

"For too long our national prevention programs targeted the white male," she said. "Today we know to achieve effective change, education and programs must be targeted to the unique needs of women."

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