



ALGERINA PERNA: SUN STAFF

At war: Dr. Susan J. Blumenthal leads the fight for women in matters of health care.

Blumenthal speaks up for women's health care

■ *Convention: The Feminist Expo hears the outspoken Assistant Surgeon General emphasize the fight for equal treatment in medical matters.*

By ALICE LUKENS
SUN STAFF

Dr. Susan J. Blumenthal has a very personal reason for working as hard as she does. She watched her mother struggle with cancer — twice. First there was thyroid cancer, when Blumenthal was only 10 years old, then breast cancer, when she was a first-year medical student. Blumenthal watched her mother dying and vowed that she would do everything she possibly could to keep other women from suffering like that.

She has kept her word — and then some. Widely regarded as one of the country's leading advocates for women's health, Blumenthal has spent much of her career working to expose sexism and inequality in the health care arena.

Blumenthal, who is U.S. Assistant Surgeon General, spoke yesterday at the Feminist Expo 2000 at the Baltimore Convention Center, where she won a Feminist First Award for her work. She told the thousands in the audience that until women find equality elsewhere in society, they won't find it in health care.

"Socioeconomic status is one of the most powerful predictors of health," she said. "... If we are going to safeguard the health of women worldwide, we must ensure educational and occupational opportunities and economic equity for all women."

Blumenthal, 7, lives in Chevy Chase with her husband. She cuts a striking figure in a navy-black uniform that displays her rank as a rear admiral for the U.S. Public Health Service, and has an attitude to match. She speaks intently and avoids answering most personal questions. Her almost-white blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail.

She is a practiced public speaker, able to cram lots of information into a short amount of time and feed the audience just enough one-liners to keep everyone alert. Although far down on a long list of speakers yesterday, she still managed to elicit cheers during her speech and even a partial standing ovation from the crowd when she finished.

Robin Morgan, the feminist author and activist who introduced her, called her "the woman ... who has helped [See Women, 8F]"

The fight for better women's health care

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put the issue of women's health and women's survival front and center on the national agenda."

When Blumenthal was a girl, women did not receive the same level of attention in health care that they do today, she said during an interview Friday. The only people who specialized in women's health were obstetricians and gynecologists, she said, and most medical studies included no women. Less than 10 percent of medical students were women, and they studied 180-pound male models in school.

"I can assure you," she said, "never once did he go through menopause or have ovarian cancer."

Women's health needs are still overlooked, Blumenthal said. Heart disease, the number one killer of women, is still considered a man's disease, and recent studies show that women are not treated as aggressively for it. People think AIDS is a man's disease too, she said, even though women are one of the fastest growing

groups infected with the virus.

Blumenthal has spent much of her professional life trying to change these inequities.

After 12 years at the National Institutes of Health, she became the country's first-ever Deputy Assistant Secretary for Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services in April 1994. During her four years in that position, funding for women's health in the department increased by about \$1 billion, or 30 percent, and women's health care became a priority.

Among her many accomplishments in that office, Blumenthal is perhaps best known for her work combating breast cancer. In the spring of 1994, she had an epiphany: If the U.S. government has the ability to detect missiles in outer space, or visualize the surface of Mars, that same technology could probably be used to detect tumors in a woman's breast.

Blumenthal worked with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, NASA and the National Cancer Institute on a program called "Missiles to Mammograms" that has transferred imaging technologies used for military purposes to improve the early detection of breast can-

cer.

Blumenthal has helped usher in other improvements. She developed a National Women's Health Information Resource Center that links thousands of women's health resources through a toll-free number and the Internet. In part due to her work at the NIH, women now must be used in clinical trials, she said, and national prevention programs that once only targeted men — like the anti-smoking campaign — are now including women, too.

Despite these gains and others, Blumenthal said yesterday, much work remains.

She said the country needs to do something about the 44 million Americans who are still uninsured. She would like to see more emphasis on prevention and lifestyle issues, which could cut premature deaths from chronic disease by as much as half.

And in the future, she said, there needs to be more emphasis on older women and minorities, especially since their numbers are growing.

"If women have been neglected," she said, "the health of women of color has been profoundly neglected. We have to ensure health equality for all."