Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Report of the Surgeon General
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The Surgeon General of the United States released a report in October of 2004 on *Bone Health and Osteoporosis*. The report summarizes what we know at this time about how to build and maintain an optimal skeleton. Why is this topic a priority on the national level and why do a report at this time? There are many urgent health issues, but of particular interest are those areas where there is information and evidence based on scientific research that certain lifestyle practices or medical interventions are known to promote health.

In the area of bone health there is a gap between the emerging scientific knowledge and the adoption of good practices by the public and in clinical settings. Adopting these practices can change the landscape for bone health in this country. There is some urgency to do better. Since osteoporotic fractures occur with the highest frequency in the elderly, projected population growth, particularly in the oldest (over 85), will mean a large population at risk unless prevention and early detection strategies are implemented. Bone health is a good target since osteoporosis is preventable, detectable and treatable. Nevertheless, most individuals with osteoporosis don’t know they have it since there are no symptoms and often the first indication is a low trauma fracture.

Both public health and medical interventions can be effective in improving bone health. Public health interventions such as encouraging adequate calcium, vitamin D and physical activity can be implemented in the entire population. Medical interventions like drugs to prevent bone loss require identifying the individual at high risk. But the last 20 years of research have identified many of the factors that put individuals at particularly high risk of fracture. The Surgeon General’s Report uses “red flags” to draw attention to the individuals in the population who should receive extra scrutiny because of high risk of low bone mass - the very old and frail, those taking glucocorticoid (or other) medications that can affect bone, those with very low weight or eating disorders, etc.

Some of the challenges that need to be addressed by all of the stakeholders in bone health are how to drive better health and scientific communication to the public and to practitioners? And how to influence the behaviors of both groups?