

# Remembering Rubens J. Pamies, MD

David Satcher, MD, PhD

In March, the nation lost one of its most accomplished medical academicians and senior medical school administrators as well as one of our most knowledgeable scholars in health care disparities and medical education. The *Journal of the National Medical Association* lost one of its longstanding editorial board members, and we all lost a very dear friend. Before I actually met Dr Pamies, I was asked everywhere I went if I knew him. That told me that he was something special. I met him many years ago while serving as a visiting professor of surgery at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and he was on my agenda as proponent of the Charles Drew Community Health Center, at which I was the guest lecturer at their annual fund raising dinner. Within days, he agreed to serve as a member of the editorial board of *JNMA*, and we maintained a constant dialogue about health care disparities and the paucity of minorities in medical school. In fact, I e-mailed him the week he passed requesting 2 positions in his summer enrichment program (see Dr Satcher's obituary) to experiment with a new concept in getting more minorities into medicine. We had discussed this many times and were finally in a position to implement it this summer. The lack of his usual prompt response did not register at the time, but he was actually in his beloved Haiti on his final medical missionary trip. His contributions to the journal and indeed everything he touched were quite enormous and his enthusiasm awe inspiring. We made a serious attempt to have him appointed surgeon general of the United States by President Obama, but he was one of the first to congratulate Dr Regina M. Benjamin on her appointment.

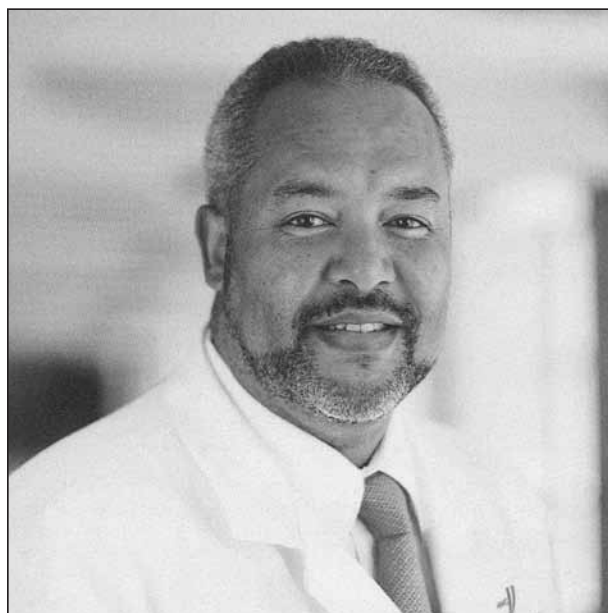
When the board was discussing how best to commemorate him in the journal, the decision was unanimous that this commentary should be written by his special colleague and coauthor, Dr David Satcher, and we are grateful to him for the obituary that follows. Let us all go forth and rededicate ourselves to the issues and principles that guided Dr Pamies' life and work, for he accomplished more in his short 51 years on this earth than most of us do in a full lifetime. I shall miss him immensely as will we all.

—Eddie L. Hoover, MD  
Editor-in-Chief, *JNMA*

*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2011;103:450-451

**Author Affiliations:** The Satcher Health Leadership Institute, Morehouse School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia.

**Correspondence:** David Satcher, MD, PhD, Director, The Satcher Health Leadership Institute, Morehouse School of Medicine, 720 Westview Dr SW Atlanta, GA 30310-1495.



I still find it very difficult to accept that Rubens Pamies is dead. Compared to me, Rubens was a young man. He was so ambitious and full of ideas for eliminating disparities in health and for improving the world. In his work at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), where he served as vice chancellor for academic affairs, dean for graduate studies, and professor of internal medicine since September 2003, he brought new meaning to the term *diversity* in the academic health center. He opened the doors of the university to minority students using very innovative strategies such as founding the Virginia-Nebraska Alliance among UNMC, Virginia Commonwealth University, and historically black colleges and universities throughout the State of Virginia—a partnership that was mutually beneficial, especially to the minority students and faculty that were afforded opportunities to study and do research at UNMC.

Prior to his tenure at UNMC, he developed the first Office of Minority Affairs at the University of South Florida, College of Medicine. My alma mater, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, where

Rubens served as associate dean for academic programs and associate dean for student affairs, honored Rubens and me by establishing The Dr David Satcher–Dr Rubens J. Pamies Scholarship for Academic Excellence for Minority Students.

In 2006, when Rubens was chair of medicine at Meharry Medical College, where I had served as president from 1982 to 1993, he asked if he could see me during a visit that I made to neighboring Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee. Rubens wanted to build on the work that I had done as surgeon general and assistant secretary for health, including setting the goal of reducing and ultimately eliminating disparities in health. He convinced me to join him in compiling a book entitled *Multicultural Medicine and Health Disparities*, using expert voices to document the nature and extent of health disparities, and hopefully raise awareness of health disparities among students, health practitioners, educators, and the American people. It was an awesome task! I not only joined him in soliciting writers and editing, but I also contributed 2 chapters myself. I will never regret that experience and we continue to receive favorable feedback from that effort. I was expecting to hear from him soon about his next venture to ameliorate health disparities.

Rubens was active in chairing the Advisory Committee on Minority Health for the US Department

of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health which advises the Secretary of Health and Human Services on ways to improve the health of racial and ethnic minority groups. He contributed greatly to programs in that capacity.

He was a loyal supporter of his country of origin, Haiti, and somehow it is very fitting that he died there. Rubens led a vigorous response to the devastating 2010 earthquake, including leading the volunteer response from UNMC, and even writing a book, *Help and Hope for Haiti*, about the relief efforts and the response to the disaster. He was in the process of trying to develop a medical school in Haiti.

So, on the road of life, we must now travel without Rubens Pamies but not without his ideals, his vision, his passion, and his commitment to diversity and the reduction and ultimate elimination of disparities in health. We will take with us all that he has taught us and all that he has inspired in us, continuing his tireless effort to realize health equity in this world.

I never expected that Rubens would die so young, that he would in fact precede me in death. But I know that life cannot be measured in years alone and that we are all better off for his having been with us for a short 52 years. Rubens Pamies leaves me, and all of us, with the challenge to make the best of the years that we have for "tomorrow is not promised to us." He has done us proud.