

Prepared Statement: A brief history of the Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS

By

C. Everett Koop, MD, ScD
Surgeon General
U.S. Public Health Service
And Deputy Assistant secretary for Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Presented Before the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee

Washington, DC

January 15, 1987

The following notes have been added by Dr. Koop in 2003 to explain the circumstances of the talk given in 1987:

It has been just short of three months since I had a press conference announcing the release of the Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and the release of a public service announcement for use on television advertising its availability. As the user of this archive will note, the lectures will now follow in rapid succession after the previous one in an effort of the Surgeon General to reach as many people through as many available venues as was possible.

This was the second public address I made, and the first to Congress in what I call the enlightened era of AIDS, which was post-first administration Reagan. Every word in this report is essential and therefore, I will not attempt to summarize it. It does provide a very necessary background for all that is to follow.

My remarks cover not only the brief history of how I came to write the report, but also covered, to some extent, the groups that I had met with in consultation. In my prepared remarks, which I left behind for use by the press and the committee, there was a list of the 27 groups in question. I also took this occasion to quote some of the extraordinary responses to the report itself, by Mrs. Ann Kahn, the President of the National PTA; President Mary Hatwood Futrell of the National Education Association; and Lew Barker, Senior Vice President of the American Red Cross. I mentioned testimonies from the religious front: Larry Braidfoot and his colleagues from the Christian life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and Rabbi Henry D. Michelman, writing after a joint consultation with the Synagogue Council of America.

I took full responsibility of the actual writing of the report, told of presenting it to the health group of the Cabinet Council and eventually to the White House Domestic Council.

I offered three hi-lights. First, the risk of infection increases with increased number of sexual partners – male or female. Second, the best protection against infection right now, barring abstinence, is the use of a condom. And third, we need to get the facts about this disease to every adult and every adolescent in America.

To impress the Senatorial Committee, I noted that the report had been published in full in the Journal of the American Medical Association and the Los Angeles Times, and that the report had either been copied, or is being circulated as is, in many countries on five continents using as best examples the governments of France and Australia and the use of the report as a template by the United Kingdom.

Mr. Chairman, I welcome this opportunity to bring before this Committee a brief history of the Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS.

In February 1986, during a visit to the Department of Health and Human Services, President Reagan asked me to report to him and to the American people on just what the AIDS threat was all about.

Although the U.S. Public Health Service and other public and private organizations disseminated current, accurate information about AIDS, the country was rife with rumors and misinformation about the disease and the people who were at the highest risk.

The greatest human fear, of course, is the fear of the unknown. Therefore, the President directed me to lay before the American people everything that was known...and to do that in plain English. From that day on, barely a day went by over the next eight months that I was not involved in that assignment in some way.

I was sure that an objective report on the health and medical aspects of AIDS could be produced, despite the presence of many sensitive and controversial issues. Surgeons General have done that in similar situations in the past, and I am committed to maintain that tradition.

I also consciously tried to make sure that the Surgeon General's Report on AIDS did not merely reflect my own or any single person's values, opinions, or prejudices. To that end, I made the maximum possible effort to secure the advice and counsel from a broad spectrum of concerned individuals and organizations. I consulted with the best medical and scientific experts available from within and outside the government. But I also met with leaders of many organizations concerned with the health, education and social well-being of the American people; I wanted to hear what they, too, had to say about the threat of the AIDS virus.

The response to my request has been nothing short of extraordinary. For example:

- Mrs. Ann. Kahn, the President of the National PTA, wrote to tell me that she and her colleagues "benefited greatly" from our meeting and went on to say, "We would be happy to share a copy of your report with our 25,000 local units."
- President Mary Hatwood Futrell of the National Education Association told me she had ordered 3,000 copies of the report "for distribution to NEA leaders."
- Lew Barker, Senior Vice President of the American Red Cross, told me my report was "clear, incisive, accurate, and of great value" to the Red cross as it pursues its own public information and education programs.
- After I met with Larry Braidfoot and his colleagues from the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, he said the meeting had been "a very helpful one in catalyzing within our group a focus for a growing concern about the problem and its threat to our society and its families."
- And after a "joint consultation" on the AIDS report with the Synagogue Council of America, Rabbi Henry D. Michelman assured me that the Council "wishes to cooperate with (me) in every way possible."

Those are just a few examples of many that I could offer, if we had the time. In any case, Mr. Chairman, I've attached to the concluding page of this statement a list of all 27 organizations.

Finally, when it came time to do the actual writing – for which I personally take full responsibility – I tried to be as sensitive as possible to certain feelings that had been shared with me by many of those same individuals and organizations, yet not be so sensitive as to prejudice the objective information in any way.

Thanks to the contributions of so many concerned and dedicated people, I was able to produce a report, which, I believe, reflects a wide range of experience with this disease and with many of the key issues that surround it. The report presents in plain English all the most up-to-date, pertinent, and factual information that the American people need to protect themselves and their loved ones from the spread of AIDS.

I finished the manuscript this past September. I presented it to the Health Work Group of the Cabinet Council and to the White House Domestic Council as a whole. They accepted my report without change and sent it in to the President. I then released the document at a Department press conference on October 22. At this time, I want to submit a copy for the record.

If I may, Mr. Chairman, I would like to emphasize for the record, that throughout this assignment, I was accorded full independence to pursue the research and writing of my report in whatever manner I thought appropriate, and at no time, did anyone in government try to exercise any undue influence upon the outcome.

Mr. Chairman, if I had to give just the highlights of the report, I would offer these three:

First, the risk of infection increases with increased numbers of sexual partners – male or female. Anyone who engages in freewheeling, casual sex is playing a dangerous game. Unless you know with absolute certainty that your sex partner has not become infected with the AIDS virus – through sex or through drug use – you're taking a chance on becoming infected. Conversely, unless you are absolutely certain that you yourself are not carrying the AIDS virus, you must consider the possibility that you can infect others.

Second, the best protection against infection right now, barring abstinence, is the use of a condom. A condom should be used during sexual relations, from start to finish, with anyone who you know is – or suspect might be – infected.

And third, we need to get the facts about this disease to every adult and every adolescent. Many people – especially our youth – are not receiving information that is vital to their future health and well-being because of our reticence in dealing with the subjects of sex, sexual practices, and homosexuality. This silence must end. We can no longer afford to sidestep frank, open discussions about sexual practices. As parents, educators, and community leaders, we must assume our responsibility to provide our young people with education about human sexuality. I would prefer that a child's parents, within the context of the family, provide such education. But we also need sex education in schools, beginning at the lowest grade possible as part of any

appropriate health and hygiene program. With that kind of assistance, our children can grow up knowing the kinds of behavior to avoid in order to protect themselves from exposure to the AIDS virus.

Mr. Chairman, the threat of AIDS should be sufficient to permit a sex education curriculum with a heavy emphasis on the prevention of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The need is critical; the price of neglect is high.

As part of our own education and information effort, we have already distributed over 250,000 free copies of the Surgeon General's Report in response to telephone and mail requests to my office and to other agencies within the Public Health service.

In addition, such publications as the Journal of the American Medical Association and the Los Angeles Times have reprinted the report in full for their readers. We have made camera-ready copies available to a number of national organizations who wish to do their own printing and distribution.

The report has also either been copied or is being circulated as is, in many countries on five continents. For example, the governments of France and Australia have informed their own citizens. And later this week I will be meeting with representatives of the British Government, who wish to do their own report, modeled closely upon ours.

With this kind of reception, I believe the Surgeon General's Report on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is having the salutary effect the President had hoped for...not only here in the United States but elsewhere in the world as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And now, I'll be happy to answer your questions.